

Luke and Leia by Kamiye Celeek

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Summary: Will thought he and the new girl were kind of like Luke and Leia and his best friend was like Han Solo. Except Luke and Leia were twins and Luke didn't have a hopeless crush on Han that would never go anywhere. AKA the separated at birth fic that one person asked for.

1. Once Upon a Time

Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a woman who had a horrible man for a husband. He didn't hit her, but he was loud and loved to put her down with his words. They had a son named Jonathan who was the bright spot in the woman's life, since he seemed to understand that his parents weren't in the best place but consistently sided with his mother. The woman was even planning to leave her husband, but that changed when she found out she was pregnant again. Her husband found out before she could try and hide it and she was stuck with no way out. Her only solace was a police officer who happened to be her closest friend. He stood by her through her pregnancy, often taking care of Jonathan while she was at check-ups.

Then she found out she was having twins.

One boy, and one girl.

She knew that her husband would neglect the twins as much as her other son. And she knew that she wanted at least one of her children to have a better life. So she and the police officer came up with a plan. She would keep the boy, and he would take the girl to raise as his daughter. Her husband didn't know that she was having twins, so the lie would be easy to tell. And he didn't suspect a thing. He wasn't the smartest man and she was wondering how she'd ever loved him enough to marry him in the first place.

When she was close to giving birth, her friend brought her to the city where nobody knew her or her husband. She went into labor and was brought to the hospital, where her son was born first, then her daughter. She named her son William James and her daughter Jane Eleanor. They were both so perfect and beautiful, and she wished that she could raise them both. But her friend promised that he'd send her pictures and letters to make it easier. And so she let go.

As she predicted, her husband was no less caring towards Will than he was towards Jonathan. She was glad Jane (or El, as her friend had nicknamed her after her middle name) was with the police officer in

Chicago. As the letters and photos arrived, she monitored her daughter's progress as much as her son's. Jonathan and Will had no clue they had a sister. One day, maybe they'd meet her. And they'd be mad at their mother for lying and hiding her. But for now, all she could think of was that her family was safe and well.

Especially once she divorced Lonnie.

But that wasn't the end of the story...

No, because the truth would come out. And her sons *would* be mad at her for lying. But they'd be overjoyed to have a sister, and El would be overjoyed to have brothers. And Hawkins would see the closest set of siblings that it had seen in many, many years. But it would also see an epic story of young love, of sibling rivalry, of learning to let go and move forward. It would see friendships tested and tried, emerging stronger or more broken than ever, new ones emerging from the ashes.

And it all started with Joyce Byers' lie to Lonnie.

2. Will and El

Will let out a groan as his alarm went off. It was the first day of seventh grade and he was *not* looking forward to it. Another year of being harassed by Troy and his minions, another year of being an outcast, another year of having a hopeless crush on his best friend, Mike Wheeler. Yeah, any kid would be totally excited for that, especially since it was 1983 and being gay was almost completely frowned upon by most people.

"Will, you're gonna be late!" Jonathan called through the door.

"I'm coming!" Will got up and headed into the bathroom before getting dressed. By the time he got to the kitchen, his mom was grabbing her keys and heading out the door, calling a goodbye over her shoulder as she took her car to work.

"You ready for another year?" Jonathan sighed as he walked outside with Will.

"Ready as I'll ever be. I hate middle school."

"I hated it, too. But you have better friends than I did, so that's something, right?"

"Right." Will thought of Mike, Lucas, and Dustin and fidgeted a bit before getting on his bike. "I'll see you after school."

"Bye!"

The small twelve-year-old pedaled towards Maple Street, where he met up with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin on the way to school. All three of them were talking about the D&D campaign they were planning, and Will couldn't help but put in his own two cents. Then Dustin brought up a new topic that they hadn't heard about before, at least not in the way he was talking about it.

"Did you hear there's going to be a new girl this year?" he asked.

"New girl?" Will inquired.

"Yeah. Her dad's the new Chief and she just moved here from Chicago."

"How do *you* know about her?" Lucas questioned.

"I heard a couple officers talking about her while I was in the station last week. They said she's going into seventh grade, just like us."

"Great. Another girl to make fun of us and for you to awkwardly hit on."

"Hey!"

Hawkins Middle came into view and the four boys parked their bikes at the rack. Their fellow students were all milling around, talking or walking towards the building for another year of learning and forced social interaction. Will sighed and glanced around while Dustin and Lucas argued over a comic Lucas had supposedly won from the curly-haired member of the Party.

As always, Will felt there was some kind of... hole in his life. It had nothing to do with him being gay or the fact that his parents were divorced. No, it had been long before either of those things. He'd always felt lonely. Like somebody who was supposed to be with him wasn't and their absence was what was causing that hole. He'd felt that way for as long as he could remember and it *sucked*. Maybe one day he'd figure it out but for now, he was stuck.

Then he noticed a Blazer with *Hawkins Police* on the side pulling into the parking lot. The officer driving parked the car and a few moments later, the passenger-side door opened. A girl with wavy brown hair got out and stood on the pavement before shutting the door and waving goodbye.

She was short, Will noted. About his height from what he could tell. Her hair went just past her shoulders and was a light brown color that matched Jonathan's. Instead of wearing dresses or sweaters like the other girls that went to Hawkins Middle, she wore a pair of overalls and a striped blue shirt with a pair of Converse. Her hair was held back from her face with a pink headband that had a bow on the side, just straddling the line between girly-girl and tomboy.

"Is that the new girl?" he asked Dustin. His friend looked over and nodded.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's her. Wow, she's pretty cute."

"I guess, but what the hell is up with the farmgirl look?" Lucas snorted. "Right, Mike?"

The three boys turned to look at their dark-haired DM, who was staring at the new girl with what could only be described as 'heart eyes'. Will felt his heart sinking a bit but shook his head before tapping Mike on the shoulder to snap him out of it.

"Mike. You're staring."

"Oh! Sorry..." He looked embarrassed. "She's just really pretty."

"You had heart-eyes, motherfucker," Dustin snickered.

"I did *not*!" They started moving towards the building. "I just wasn't expecting the new girl to be so... so..."

"So pretty you forgot how to talk and describe things?"

"That."

"Well, I bet you Stacey and her minions are gonna get ahold of her and she'll be like every other pretty girl at this school. You're screwed, my friend."

Will couldn't help but feel jealous... but at the same time, he felt a little drawn to the new girl. It was like a magnet, pulling him towards her. Not like Mike, but in a... different way.

Like he knew her somehow.

"Here we are. Hawkins Middle."

Hopper parked the Blazer and El peered out the window for a moment, a little surprised there were so many middle-school kids in such a small town. Her eyes landed on a group of boys talking by the

bike rack, specifically the smallest one who had brown hair.

"Have a good day, El, okay? And remember: kids can be assholes, but just hold your head up and get through it."

"Yeah. Thanks for driving me."

"It's too far for you to ride your bike. I'm legally obligated to ensure you get to school."

El rolled her eyes and opened the door, sliding out and onto the pavement below. She shut the car door, waving goodbye to her dad as he left the parking lot.

As she'd expected, kids were whispering all around her. She was the new kid and they were curious. It was only natural and she'd done it on occasion back in Chicago. But she'd never been at the end being gossiped about before, and it was a little uncomfortable.

Mr. Clarke, Science.

She approached her first class and entered the room, finding a spot in the front where she could pay better attention. Her eyes took in her surroundings. Typical science-class stuff adorned the walls, with Mr. Clarke's name written on the board and a model of the human brain sitting on a stand on his desk. She liked science, and she hoped Mr. Clarke was a good teacher.

More students filtered in, including the group of boys she'd spotted by the bike rack. The brown-haired one glanced at her and took the seat behind the one with dark hair, who sat to her right. She gave them both a friendly smile and heard snickering nearby.

"Okay, class," Mr. Clarke announced when the bell rang. "Let's start by going around and introducing ourselves. We have a brand-new student in our class this year and we want to make her feel welcome." One by one, her classmates introduced themselves until it was her turn.

"I'm El Hopper. I just moved here from Chicago with my dad." Mr. Clarke looked confused.

"I was told your name was Jane."

"Jane's my first name. I go by El, which is short for Eleanor. That's my middle name."

"Oh." Mr. Clarke looked a little embarrassed, but nodded to the dark-haired boy next to her.

"I'm Mike Wheeler."

Her heart caught in her throat as she got a look at his face. He was... pretty. She couldn't think of any other word to describe him. Pale skin dotted with freckles, brown eyes, and his hair looking like he'd never combed it in his life... her heart was pounding and she hoped he couldn't hear it.

"Will Byers." The brown-haired boy behind him had spoken and she looked at Will. He was... familiar. Like the good familiar. She was sure they'd never met, yet she felt a weird connection with him.

The other two boys from their group (which she'd decided she wanted to be in because they seemed like good friends) were Dustin Henderson and Lucas Sinclair. In the back of her mind, a voice said that the boys would never accept her because she was a girl, because she was into Dungeons & Dragons and that was lame and nerdy, because she was a city girl. They'd be too intimidated to let her join their group. Or maybe they'd make fun of her for the D&D thing. She wanted to play again as Eleven the Forceful, her mage character that she'd spent so much time developing.

Her desire for friendship outweighed her doubts about her interests and she decided to approach Will first. He seemed like the one to talk to and there was that whole *weird connection* thing. It was like there was a string tying them together that grew tighter as she walked up to him during art class—the one other class she'd had with him that morning. He was pulling his sketchbook out of his backpack and sitting down at the table.

"Hi," she greeted him, sitting down next to him.

"Hi," he replied. "El, right?"

"Yeah. And you're Will."

"Yep." He gave her an odd look. "Why are you sitting next to me?"

"Because I don't know anybody yet." She set her bag down and pulled out her own sketchbook (they'd been required for the class).

"There are a bunch of other kids in here. All of them are cooler than me." She bit her lip.

"Have you ever felt like something was missing?" she asked him out of the blue. "Like something that was supposed to be in your life just *isn't* for whatever reason?"

"Actually... yeah. I've always felt like that."

"Well, this morning, I felt this connection with you and I thought, 'well, maybe he and I are supposed to be friends.' So I decided to sit with you."

"I... I felt it, too," he admitted. "But I felt it when I saw you get out of your dad's car. Like a magnet."

"Or a string tying us together."

"Exactly!" He was smiling and El knew she hadn't fucked up like she'd thought she would.

"Would you mind if I sat with you at lunch? I don't want to eat alone..."

"Sure. Just... I hope you don't mind nerd talk."

"Nerd talk?" She felt hopeful.

Please please please say D&D.

"You know—Star Wars, comics... Dungeons & Dragons."

"I don't mind any of it. As long as you guys don't mind me bringing up Stephen King or *WarGames*."

"Okay, then. I think you'll fit in with us."

Mike was going to have a fucking panic attack and it was all Will's fault.

"What do you *mean*, she's sitting with us?!" he hissed as he and Will walked to lunch.

"I *mean*, she sat next to me in art and asked if she could sit with us because she didn't want to eat alone. And I told her it was fine."

"You should've checked with me!" Mike felt his cheeks heating up a bit; El was super pretty and the idea of any girl that good-looking sitting with *the nerds* was foreign to him.

"She said she likes Stephen King and *WarGames*."

Okay. So slightly nerdy herself. That was good.

"Sorry, it's just..."

"She's pretty and you don't know how to talk to her."

"Exactly."

They made their way to their usual lunch table, where they were soon joined by Dustin and Lucas. El came out of the lunch-line a couple minutes later and made her way over. Mike swore his heart was beating in time with her footsteps. Setting down her tray, she smiled at the four boys—Dustin and Lucas being open-mouthed at the fact that a girl was sitting with them voluntarily.

"Welcome to the nerd table," Dustin told her, breaking the silence first.

"Thank you."

"Shouldn't you sit with other people who *aren't* the uncool kids?" Lucas stated, vocalizing that El could do so much better than the Party. El shrugged.

"The 'uncool kids' are usually assholes who look down on genuinely nice people. So no, I don't want to sit with them. I'd rather sit with

the nerds."

Mike felt his heart soaring. The girl of his dreams openly admitting she preferred nerds? *Fuck. Yes.* To hide his pleased expression, he pulled out his notebook to continue planning that weekend's campaign.

"What are you writing?" she asked.

"Oh, uh... nothing..."

"She already knows we play D&D," Will sighed.

"*Dude!*" Dustin gasped.

"What are your classes?" El inquired simply. "I always played as a Mage, but I didn't really have much of a party. Just some kids from school who'd get together randomly."

Mike had decided—he was going to fucking marry this girl.

"I'm a Bard," Dustin told her. "Lucas is our Ranger, Will's our Cleric, and Mike's our Paladin."

"Maybe she can join us on our campaign," Will suggested.

"Yeah!"

"Can you write in a Mage, Mike?" Lucas asked, smirking.

"I can! Just... it's gonna take a couple days. Let me work." He cleared his throat. "So, Will said you like this thing called *WarGames*. What's that."

"It's this movie where a high schooler accidentally hacks into a government AI and it almost launches a bunch of nukes. It's super good and I think I'll rent it when it comes out on video. Maybe you guys can watch it with me."

"That sounds like fun!" Will assured her. Mike was slightly curious as to why his best friend and the new girl were so buddy-buddy, but he didn't question it. If El got along with Will, that was fine with him.

Not to mention Dustin didn't have a problem with her. Lucas was a bit of a wildcard, but he could deal with that.

"Here's my address," Mike said, scribbling it down and passing it to her. "We'll give you a time closer to the weekend. Once the campaign's finished."

"Thank you."

She smiled and his entire body heated up. He *really* hoped his face wasn't red or that would be a dead giveaway that something was up.

But, no, she didn't seem to notice, which was a relief.

El Hopper might just be a new addition to the Party.

Joyce went to answer the door. Will and Jonathan were both out—Will at Mike's and Jonathan at work—so she couldn't imagine who it might be.

To her surprise, it was Jim Hopper.

"Hello, Joyce," he greeted her.

"Hey, Hop. C'mon in."

He entered her home for the first time in over twelve years and smiled.

"This place hasn't changed a bit, has it?"

"Lonnie's not here anymore, so that's one change. I heard you were back in town. Is... is El with you?"

"She is. She's out with some friends tonight, so I figured I'd drop by so we can discuss... introducing her."

"Oh, God." Joyce felt a mixture of fear and joy.

On one hand, her baby girl—who she hadn't seen in person since the girl was *actually* a baby—was back in Hawkins. In their letters to

each other, they'd always posited the question of when and where the twins would meet again. More than likely, Will and El had already met at school, but Joyce and Hopper had yet to discuss how to introduce them to each other as twins. She knew that it wouldn't be pretty—more than likely, Will would be pissed that she'd kept it a secret—but she wanted to see them bonding.

On the other hand... she hadn't been part of El's life. She was worried that El would see her as a terrible person for handing her daughter off to a friend and keeping her son. Even though Hopper had said that El was a very forgiving person, she was afraid that this might be too much.

And Jonathan... he probably didn't even remember El. He'd been with them in Chicago when she'd given birth, and he'd held his sister and brother excitedly. But he'd only been four and memories faded with time. She hoped he had a vague recollection of those blissful few days in Hopper's Chicago apartment—where she'd spent time recovering from delivering twins and Hopper had bonded with El. Jonathan had been nothing but helpful those few days, something that hadn't changed in the past twelve years.

"They need to meet each other," she told him firmly. "As siblings. They've probably already met at school."

"They're already becoming friends, if the fact that I dropped off El at the Wheelers is any indication."

"Good." She took a deep breath. "I still have all the pictures and letters you sent me."

"Did it help?"

"It did, a little. I still felt like a shitty mother, but... she seems like she was happy in Chicago."

"She was, but she liked the idea of being somewhere less busy. Not to mention the absolute *assholes* from her old school were giving her a hard time because of her whole game obsession."

"Will loves it, too."

"Jesus, all of our kids are nerds, aren't they?" Joyce burst out laughing and Hop couldn't hide his own smile. "But... I think it needs to be a thing where we tell them together. Telling them separately wouldn't be right."

"That's true. So... your granddad's old cabin?"

"You mean my house? Where I live with our daughter?"

"Yes, there."

"Next weekend."

"Next weekend. Around six. I'll bring Will and Jonathan."

"And me and El will be waiting. Good night, Joyce."

Hopper walked back out the door and Joyce felt like twelve years of lies were finally being lifted off her shoulders. She'd be able to see her daughter regularly and not just in pictures. And maybe, just maybe, Jonathan and Will would be the best damn brothers to her ever. Okay, so that was a given, not a maybe. But still.

She couldn't wait.

Okay, so this story was requested by 1f_there_be_madness, who left it in a comment on "Normal is Overrated". And to the people who guessed this was going to be Mileven VS Byler... you were absolutely correct.

Hopper refers to Jonathan and Will as his kids because he actually helped Joyce raise Jonathan until the twins were born. And El is Will's twin sister, so he's kind of in that camp by default.

I keep seeing people who say Will and El are basically twins as it is, so this story is just me doing the same. Except, you know, they're *actually* twins.

In every AU I write where El is raised by a loving family, she seems to have a love for D&D. Weird.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

3. Mom and Hop

"El Hopper, you are a *liar*."

"No, I'm right! *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* was the first big slasher film after *Psycho*."

"*Halloween*."

"Was released two years *later*. And it's not even that scary."

Mike rolled his eyes as he listened to Dustin and El bicker.

She'd been part of their group for a week now, and she was quickly making herself quite the fixture. Even Lucas had stopped being an asshole about letting her in and accepted her with open arms. As it turned out, she had a love for horror that was only matched by the hat-wearing member of the Party. Mike, Will, and Lucas never really understood what they were talking about.

"What about *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?"

"Okay, yeah, that one's... older. But *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* was cheesy horror."

"What qualifies something as 'cheesy horror'?"

"When your killer tapes a knife to a trombone and stabs a girl repeatedly with the slide. While she's tied to a tree in a white dress."

"Okay, enough horror movie talk!" called Will.

"This isn't over," Dustin told El, pointing an accusing finger at her. "I will win this argument."

"No you won't!"

"Yes I will!"

El stuck out her tongue and the Party started laughing. She fit in with them in a way most people didn't. Sometimes, she talked about

Chicago and an older girl—practically her sister—who had been the one to teach her how to play D&D—something all four boys were grateful for. Especially Mike, who had taken to acting like she was just one of the guys to cope with the fact that he was undeniably in love with her. It seemed like the majority of the people in his life had picked up on that fact, though, making the act useless.

"You *never* let girls hang out with you," Nancy had pointed out when she met El in the basement.

"She is just *adorable*!" his mother had gushed when El had gone down to the basement on the first day of their campaign.

"Is she gonna be my sister?" Holly had asked.

It was stupid, really, to fall for someone you hadn't even known for two weeks. But stranger things had happened, and he'd actually almost asked her out a couple times. He'd been stopped by Will. Not directly, but by the way that his best friend interacted with El. They had some kind of unseen connection, an unspoken bond that went beyond anything Mike could comprehend. It was as if they could communicate through the Force like Luke and Leia. He hoped that made him Han Solo—the one Leia actually had feelings for and only kissed Luke to make him jealous.

Not that Will had feelings for El. He hoped.

"I still can't believe your dad is okay with you hanging out with four guys," Lucas commented to El. "He seems like the 'don't-touch-my-daughter-I-have-a-gun-and-I'm-not-afraid-to-use-it' type."

"He went to high school here," El sighed. "And he used to be really good friends with Will's mom."

"Wait, really?!" Will looked at her in surprise. "That's why he trusts us?"

"Your mom told him you guys are good kids, so he was okay with me hanging out with you. Plus, it keeps me from being at home and complaining that I don't have anybody to play D&D with." She crossed her arms and leaned back against the couch.

"Your dad actually sounds pretty cool."

"He is... sometimes. Then he'll start playing Jim Croce and I have to pray to *God* that nobody stops by. Thankfully, that's not a problem here in Hawkins."

"Why not?" Mike asked.

"We live in a cabin in the middle of the woods that's a five-minute walk from the nearest road. Why do you think I'm always catching a ride with him?"

"Seriously?" Lucas sounded shocked.

"Yeah. He used it for storage until we moved here and we cleaned it up so it was habitable by humans."

The thought of a cabin in the middle of nowhere seemed appealing to Mike and the rest of the Party. Plenty of fresh air and nobody interrupting anything? Yes, *please*. But El didn't seem to like it much—or if she did, maybe she was still settling in and it was a dramatic shift from the hustle and bustle of the third-largest city in America. After all, she'd been raised in Chicago. Hawkins must've seemed so boring in comparison.

"But, now he's got me cleaning up even more because we're having guests over on Saturday. Speaking of which, I can't make it to the campaign."

"Same here," Will added. "Mom said we're going somewhere."

Then it clicked in Will and El's heads. Hopper and Joyce being old friends, and both of them having other plans for Saturday? Chances were that Will's family were the guests at the cabin that Hopper was expecting.

"It sucks that you guys can't make it," Dustin stated. "But have fun with whatever's going on."

Sure enough, Saturday afternoon found Will hiking through the woods with his mother and brother on the way to the Hopper

residence. Tripwires were set up out front—for intruders, he guessed. The cabin itself was made of logs and fairly small, but cozy-looking and perfect for a family of two. Joyce stepped forwards and knocked on the door in a pattern.

Knock knock.

Knock.

Knock knock knock.

It was opened by Hopper, who welcomed them inside. Will glanced around and saw El sitting on the couch. She was fiddling with a piece of paper and Hopper gently tapped her on the shoulder.

"The Byers are here," he told her. She turned and shot a smile at Will.

"Hey, Will!"

"Hey, El!"

"El, this is my friend, Joyce. And her oldest son, Jonathan."

"Welcome to the cabin," El told the visitors with the same broad smile. "Will, you wanna see my room?"

"Sure."

The two headed into El's bedroom—which was small, Will noted, but perfect for her. A bookshelf was crammed with things like Nancy Drew, Stephen King, and classic novels. Posters for movies like *Airplane!* and *The Shining* were on the walls. There were also drawings of cats and dogs done in loving detail hanging between the posters. Overall, the room screamed El's personality and Will noticed there were a few rough sketches on El's small desk. They were sketches of the Party, though it appeared that his and Mike's were a bit more complete than Lucas and Dustin's.

"Wow, El! These are good!"

"Eh. Not the best. You're still the better artist."

"No, I'm serious. This is... amazing. You even got Mike's freckles right." El blushed, confirming what Will had suspected thanks to their weird connection.

She feels the same way about Mike as I do.

"Knock knock," called Jonathan, sticking his head in. "Mind if I hang out with you guys?"

"Not at all!" El sat down on her bed and Will sat next to her. Jonathan ended up taking the chair and facing the two.

"You got any music?" he asked.

"A little. It's hard to get stuff that's from less than thirty years ago since my dad likes the oldies. But my favorite is 'Should I Stay or Should I Go'."

"Well, that's something you and Will have in common."

There it was *again*. The connection. They were so similar, and yet so different. There was something to it and they both wanted an explanation for said connection.

Jonathan, El, and Will ended up talking for a bit while Joyce and Hopper made dinner in the kitchen. Jonathan was glad that Will had made a friend who shared his interests outside of his initial circle, and El was happy to have Jonathan as a possible friend. He complimented her drawings like Will had, saying that she should try photography, too. He even offered to teach her how to get the best shots.

"Kids, time to eat!" Joyce announced. All three came out to find a table had been set for five. Dinner was nothing fancy, but it was fine for friends eating together. Joyce seemed quiet as she kept glancing at El.

"Mom, is something wrong?" Jonathan asked.

"Nothing's wrong." All three kids gave her a look that said they didn't believe her and she sighed. "All right, there's a... reason... we're having dinner together tonight."

"And why's that?" El inquired.

"Well... there's something Hopper and I have been hiding from the three of you, and now that he's back in Hawkins... it's time to tell you the truth."

Will felt nervous. What could his mom have been hiding?

"El... I'm not really your dad," Hopper confessed.

"What?!" She stood straight up. "What do you *mean* you're not my dad?! The hell kind of bullshit is that?!"

"He's not your father by blood," Joyce said. "My ex-husband, Lonnie, is your father and I'm your mother. You and Will are twins."

Dead silence.

Will looked at El, whose face was unreadable. She clearly didn't know how to respond and he didn't either.

Twins. El is my twin sister. I have a sister. It's El.

Goddammit.

"Why would you hide this?!" Jonathan exploded for the now-silent twins.

"I couldn't afford to take care of three kids!" Joyce explained. "And, in case you forgot, your father is a deadbeat asshole who doesn't give a damn about either of you! I gave all three of you another chance by letting Hopper take El!"

"But... you missed everything..." whispered El, her eyes filling with tears.

"She didn't miss a damn thing," Hopper corrected. "We stayed in touch and I sent her letters and pictures of you all the time."

"I still have every single one."

"This explains so much," murmured Will.

"What does it explain?" Joyce questioned.

"All my life, I felt like there was a piece missing. Like somebody who was supposed to be there wasn't. And then as soon as I saw El, I felt this connection like a magnet pulling us together. She's my *twin*. It explains all of it."

"You're not mad?"

"Oh, no, I'm *pissed* that you hid my twin sister from me in Chicago. But I'm happy because I don't feel like the piece is missing anymore. El was the piece."

"Same here," El agreed. She and Will hugged, their first display of sibling affection.

"So, wait, how did she end up with Hopper?" Jonathan inquired.

"We'd been friends in high school and stayed close when he became a police officer in Hawkins when you were little. He helped me raise you and helped me get through being pregnant with Will and El. And... he offered to help me by taking El. You probably don't remember, but you went with us to Chicago when I gave birth."

"I was born in Chicago?" Will seemed intrigued by this new fact.

"Yes. When we came back to Hawkins—you, me, and Jonathan—Lonnie hadn't even noticed we'd been gone for three weeks. All he noticed was that there was a new baby."

Jonathan suddenly realized why his mom had given El away. And it wasn't like she'd given El away to a stranger or a bad person; she'd been given to a police officer who cared about her and had eventually become Hawkins Chief of Police. El had been raised by a caring man who still wanted Joyce to be part of her life and that seemed like all that mattered.

He was still mad at his mother for lying.

"Do I have to live with the Byers now?" El asked, tilting her head.

"Not if you don't want to," Hopper replied. "But we wanted you three

to know the truth now that you and I are back in Hawkins for good."

"I don't think I'm ready to live there full-time, but I *could* spend the night when Dad's working," she told Joyce.

"That would be great, sweetheart. I'd hate for you to be alone out here."

"That's what the tripwires are for—to tell me if a serial killer is trying to get in."

Joyce felt a sense of calming relief. Her children didn't hate her. They were mad at her for lying (as she'd known they would be) but they didn't hate her. And El seemed more than willing to try and get to know her.

"If you want, you can spend the night," Hopper offered to the Byers. "We have a spare cot and the couch is pretty comfy. And I'm pretty sure El has a sleeping bag somewhere around here."

"Yeah, buried under all your shitty music."

"Watch it, young lady."

"Thanks, Hop, but we don't want to..." Joyce trailed off as she noticed looks from her sons and daughter that plainly protested any of them leaving. "All right. We'll stay."

El started to head towards the closet.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hopper asked.

"To get my sleeping bag."

"Not with food still on your plate. Eat."

"*Fucking peas...*"

Joyce stifled a laugh, despite the language from her little girl.

"Hey, El?"

"Yeah, Will?"

"Should... should we tell the guys? About us being brother and sister?"

Currently, El was lying on her bed and Will was in her sleeping bag on the floor. Jonathan and Joyce were sleeping in the living room and Hopper was in his own bed. The twins were glad to be sharing.

"I don't know. I mean... it changes things in a *big way*."

"Tell me about it. All this time, I've been the only one of us with a brother. Mike and Lucas just have sisters, and Dustin's an only child. They keep telling me how lucky I am to have a brother, how much having a sister sucks... and now I have a sister. And you don't suck, El. If anything, you're going to be the awesome sister of our Party."

"Well, I have two sisters."

"You do?"

"From Dad's first marriage and then his ex-wife's second. They live in Chicago with her, and I thought she was my mom. But now it makes sense why she never wanted anything to do with me. I'm not her kid. I'm your mom's."

"Oh."

"I've never had a brother before. It's kind of weird, having a mom and two brothers out of nowhere."

"You never thought you weren't Hopper's kid?"

"He always treated me like he treated Kat and Sarah. But Sarah's not his kid, either."

"How old are they?"

"Hm?"

"How old are your sisters?"

"Kat's sixteen. Sarah's three."

"So you've got that in common with Mike, then."

"I guess. Except I actually get along with my older sister."

"Jesus, I just realized my family almost *doubled* in size tonight."

"Wait, really?"

"Hopper obviously has a thing for Mom. And you're my twin. I'm never going to get rid of you."

"That's how it's *supposed* to work, dumbass."

Will took a deep breath.

"Telling the guys—your thoughts?"

"Well, I'm worried they might treat me differently if they find out I'm your sister. I like the way things are now. But think of what happens if one of us gets into a fight with one of the others. If we don't tell them we're twins, then we can't pull out the 'we're siblings' excuse for supporting each other and have to come up with an actual reason for siding with each other."

"True."

"And... you never have to side with me just because I'm your sister. Just like you never have to side with any of them just because they're your friends."

"Same to you."

"So we're not telling them."

"Nope. This is a secret between us while we figure it out."

"Can I tell you another secret?"

"Sure."

"Seriously, never tell anybody. Especially not the guys."

Will got up and sat on the bed as she sat upright. They were facing each other now because he'd sensed that this was so important to her. Must've been the twin minds thing.

"Okay," she breathed, taking a deep breath. "I... I have a crush on Mike."

"I kinda figured that out based on how much detail you put into sketching him."

"Will!" She made a face. "Don't tell, please."

"I won't. As long as you can keep a secret for me."

"A secret for a secret."

"Right. I... haven't told anybody this. Not even Mom or Jonathan. But you're my sister and I feel like you'll keep it."

"I will."

"Okay... I'm gay." She blinked at him, then gave him a supportive smile.

"That's fine."

"You're okay with it?"

"Yeah. Kat's best friend is a lesbian, and Kali's one of the coolest people I know, so being gay is okay in my book. How'd you figure it out, anyway?"

He refused to look her in the eye and she knew.

"Oh... Will..."

"It's fine."

"You like him, too."

"Yeah, but it's fine. He's not interested in me. Not like that."

"How do you know?"

"Because he likes *you*." El's mouth opened in shock. "I know because your first day, he kept talking about how pretty you are. And after he actually talked to you, he started saying how perfect you are and how much he likes you."

"Will, if you like him, I won't—"

"No. I want him to be happy. And if being with you makes him happy... I won't stand in the way."

"I'm not going to go after him." He stared at her. "If he wants to be with me, he'll come after me. I won't date him unless he asks. Because then I'll know he's serious."

For the second time that night, El and Will shared an embrace as siblings. The weight of the secrets they'd shared was on their shoulders, but they had each other. That was what mattered for a support system. Each of them had a confidant that they could trust with their secrets—even if that secret happened to be that they both had a crush on Michael Theodore Wheeler. Will didn't want to lose his sister, which was why he lied and told her he was okay with her being with Mike.

"Hey, El?"

"Yeah, Will?"

"You've seen *Star Wars*, right?"

"Of course. I lived in Chicago, not under a rock."

"Our connection's kind of like Luke and Leia. Except they're not twins."

"I bet they are."

"What?"

"They were separated at birth, like us, and Leia was raised on Alderaan and Luke on Tatooine. Hey, maybe that's why Vader *really* froze Han in carbonite—because he knew that Leia was his daughter and Han was his daughter's boyfriend."

"So in this situation, I'm Luke, you're Leia, Mike is Han, and Hopper is Vader? Guess Mike better watch out for carbonite..."

El started laughing and Will got back into the sleeping bag.

"That makes Dustin Chewie and Lucas is C3-PO."

"Agreed." Will smiled.

Things were starting to get a little better.

I know, I know. It's bullshit that they're keeping it from the rest of the Party. But they're trying to adjust to the new family dynamic and they don't need the guys complicating things unnecessarily. Mike's already doing it by existing.

Also, yes. My OC and Sarah are both El's sisters. And while Sarah isn't Hopper's daughter by blood, she's still his daughter where it counts—he cares about her.

Also also, the reason Will says Luke and Leia aren't twins is because this is fall 1983. As in, Return of the Jedi wasn't out yet and that hadn't been revealed. So yeah, he thinks Luke and Leia aren't twins (contrary to my own damn title and summary) but that doesn't bother him.

Next time, the twins hang out and the Party gets suspicious.

So long and thanks for all the fish.

4. Bullies and Waffles

As it turned out, having a twin sister was kind of cool.

Since Hopper had to work a lot of the time, El ended up going to the Byers more than the cabin when school was over for the day. She and Will would play games and work on homework together while they waited for Joyce to come home from work. Slowly, all three of her kids were starting to forgive her for lying. Not to mention she offered to buy El a bed for when Hopper worked the night shift so that her youngest wouldn't have to sleep in a sleeping bag every time. That offer was accepted and Hopper chipped in to pay half.

On top of that, keeping the fact that they were closely related a secret turned out to be easier than they thought. Dustin, Lucas, and Mike hadn't noticed anything unusual about it and it was almost Halloween—almost two months since the twins had found out about the fact. None of them suspected anything. To them, El spending time at Will's made sense because Hopper and Joyce were friends and nobody wanted a twelve-year-old girl spending time out in the woods by herself at night. Especially not her friends.

But, as we all know, people—especially seventh graders—can be such *assholes*. For the most part, El hadn't seen Troy and his minions bullying Will. They always did it when she wasn't around because Troy wanted her to think of him as a possible boyfriend. Which, of course, *fucking no*, but it got the point across. She flew under Troy's radar as a target because she was a girl—a pretty girl. And nobody wanted to see a pretty girl get hurt by a boy.

There was nothing about pretty girls being hurt by boys, though.

"Jane Hopper."

She looked up from her book to see Stacey and her two back-up dancers, Norah and Libby. Jennifer Hayes was nowhere to be seen, meaning they'd sent her off on an errand somewhere. Which meant that they didn't want her to stop them.

"Hi, Stacey," El greeted the popular girl. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much." She smiled, but it was twisted. Like she had something up her sleeve.

"Well, in that case, I'm going to go..."

El started to stand up and found herself forced back down by Norah and Libby.

"Where are you going, Plain Jane?"

"I've got to go meet up with my friends."

"*Friends?* They're not your friends, Jane. They're four boys who want to have the bragging rights about being with you." She reached out and tugged on one of El's pigtails. "You're so innocent and sweet. The long-haired look doesn't suit you, though. Let's fix that."

Immediately, El tried to escape again and again was forced down by Norah and Libby. When she tried to scream for help, a hand was slapped across her mouth as she struggled to get free. Stacey pulled a pair of scissors out of her bag and grabbed one of El's pigtails. Her face was nothing but cruel as she cut it halfway between the end and the band holding it in place. The worst part was that she didn't do the same to El's other pigtail, leaving it lopsided and El crying as the three cheerleaders let her go.

"Bye, Plain Jane."

El sobbed and grabbed the hair that had been cut as soon as the girls were gone before running out of the library. It was stupid to cry—it was just *hair*—but it had taken so long to grow out to that length. And now it was just gone. All because of Stacey.

She didn't know where she was going, but she found a door and tripped as she ran inside. A radio sat on the table with a couple of headsets attached and she knew where she was. The A/V room. It was last period; she knew that the boys came there on Thursdays for their club meetings.

Don't let them see you cry.

Will's the only one who will understand.

Will, on the other hand, had begun picking up on his sister's distress. He raised his hand and asked Miss Dimerco if he could go to the nurse's office. She nodded and he grabbed his backpack, rushing out of the classroom and to the library. El tended to spend her free period at the end of the day there, waiting for school to end. But she wasn't there and he ended up leaving without any idea of where else she might've gone.

"C'mon, El... give me something..." he muttered, walking swiftly through the halls.

The invisible string that bound them tugged him towards the A/V room, which confused him. He quickened his pace and opened the door. Initially, he didn't see anything and thought it was a mistake until he heard a muffled sob from a corner of the room. He closed the door behind him and turned on the light to see El curled in a ball, crying hard and sniffing.

"El?" She looked up and wiped her eyes.

"Will. What are you doing here?"

"What happened?"

"Nothing..."

"El, you're crying in the corner of the A/V room. Obviously, *something* happened." Will set his backpack on the table before sitting next to his sister. "I feel it. You're upset."

Trembling, El reached for her right pigtail and showed him where it had been cut to half-length. The other half was in her hand.

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I'm your *brother*, El. It matters to me."

"I don't want to talk about it. A-anyway, shouldn't you be in class?"

"Yeah, but you're more important. People shouldn't treat you like

this. So if you need to cry, go ahead. I won't judge you."

They sat there for the rest of the period, El crying while Will kept a comforting arm around her. Neither realized that the bell had rung until they heard Mike, Lucas, and Dustin outside the room. El tried to scramble to her feet to leave, but Will shook his head and she sat back down.

The door opened.

"Hey, where's Will?" Dustin asked.

"I don't know," Mike replied, shrugging. They were on their way to A/V club. Usually, they'd be joined by Will once he made sure Jonathan had El, but something was up. None of them had seen him since lunch.

"You think he went home with El?" Lucas suggested.

"He would've told us if that was the case," Dustin retorted. "He didn't say anything."

"Let's call him on the radio once we get to the A/V room," Mike stated.

Reaching the club room, they were talking about what they'd do for the meeting when Mike opened the door and his stomach and heart dropped to the floor.

El was sitting on the floor, tear-tracks on her cheeks and eyes red from crying. Will was there, too, an arm across El's shoulders as he obviously tried to comfort her.

"What the hell happened?!" Dustin yelled. Lucas shut the door so nobody else would see their Mage in that state.

"Some asshole cut El's hair in the library," Will spat. Mike noticed the hair in El's hands and the remnants of what had been an adorable pigtail on her head.

Rage flooded Mike's body and he wanted to go track down whoever

had done this to punch them in the face. *Nobody* treated his friends like this, especially not El. He *never* wanted to see this kind of look on her face again. It wasn't fair; she was the prettiest girl in school and they'd *treated her like garbage*.

"Who was it?!"

"Doesn't matter," El mumbled.

"It matters!"

"I tried to get her to tell me and she said the same thing."

"Oh my—was it Troy?! I'm going to beat his ass into the ground—"

"It wasn't Troy."

"Then *who*?"

El shook her head and buried her face in Will's shoulder. Mike felt a wave of emotion—frustration, rage, worry, and jealousy. All of it flowed through his system at once and he didn't know what to do. But a party member required assistance, and it was his duty to provide that assistance. Some form of noble pride or chivalry wouldn't let him calm down until this was resolved to his satisfaction.

He crouched in front of El and gently took her hand. It was soft to the touch and he wanted to hold it forever, but there was something more important than his feelings for her.

"El, *please*. Who did this?" His voice was quieter now, more gentle, and she seemed to be comforted by that.

"These three girls from the cheerleading squad," she confessed in her soft voice. "They... they cornered me in the library and two of them held me down while the third one... she said long hair didn't suit me and just cut my hair with a pair of scissors. I ran down here after they were gone and Will showed up a few minutes later."

Mike pulled her into a hug and she accepted, even tightening her grip on him. Then Dustin headed for the door.

"Will, c'mon," he urged. "Let's go call Hopper. Those bitches need to pay."

"I'm right behind you."

Lucas gave Mike one last look before following Will and Dustin out of the room. Mike and El were alone, but he just sat there stroking her hair comfortingly. He was careful to avoid where it had been cut so she wouldn't start crying again. He loved her curls, and how soft they could be. It was one-hundred percent El and it was even better when she smiled. But she wasn't smiling now.

"They won't get away with this," he assured her. "I promise."

"It looks horrible."

"I like you with short hair. And long hair. As long as you keep the curls."

Shut up Wheeler.

"Long hair is pretty," she whispered.

"It doesn't matter with you."

God fucking dammit shut your mouth.

"Why not?"

WHEELER I SWEAR TO GOD

"Because you're *always* pretty."

And there go any chances you had with her. A for effort, thanks for playing, you're screwed.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. Remember? Friends don't lie." She hugged him tighter and he swore that his heart was going to beat out of his damn chest.

"Thank you, Mike. Thank you so much."

"You wanna go find the others before something happens?"

"Yes, please."

He helped her to her feet and they headed down the hall towards the office. Will was already on the phone and the secretary let out a gasp as soon as she saw El.

"Hopper wants to talk to you," Will told El, handing her the phone. She took it from him, still shaking a bit, and Mike could hear the Chief through the receiver.

"El, who the hell did this to you?"

"Some of the cheerleaders..."

"Okay, I'm not going to try and drag this from you now. Just... go to Will's and stay there until my shift is over. Don't go to the Wheeler kid's place. Go to the Byers. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I'll see you later, sweetheart."

"Bye, Dad."

She hung up and Will put a hand on her shoulder.

"He said go straight to your house," she told him. "And to stay there until his shift is over."

"Jonathan's probably wondering where you are, anyway. Let's go."

Mike's feet moved of their own accord as he followed Will and El out the door. Dustin and Lucas weren't far behind and they saw Jonathan waiting in the parking lot. As soon as he saw El, he was running over.

"What the hell happened?"

"Some cheerleader bitches jumped her in the library and sliced her hair off!" Dustin fired off. "Who the *fuck* does that?!"

"Did you call Hopper?" he asked Will.

"Yeah. He said to go to our house and stay there until his shift is over."

"All right. C'mon, Ellie. I'll take you home."

"Can I come?" Mike blurted.

"Don't you four have A/V club?"

"A party member requires assistance, and it is our duty to provide that assistance," Lucas stated, looking the older boy in the eye. Jonathan nodded.

"Okay. I'm driving El home. There's not enough room for all your bikes."

"Lucas and I can bike there," Dustin offered. "Will and Mike can ride with you."

"All right then. I'll see you there."

When they got to the Byers house, Mike was reminded that he hadn't been there in a while. Whenever they hung out, it was usually at the Wheelers because of the basement. But the place looked a little different. For one, there were two extra chairs at the dining room table. But that made sense, given how much time El and Hopper spent at the Byers. Going into Will's room, Mike discovered a second bed had been added for no apparent reason. That reason was made apparent when El came into the room and curled up on the second bed, hiding under the blanket.

"You stay here enough that you have your own bed?" Mike inquired, tilting his head.

"Yes. It was Mrs. Byers's idea. Dad paid for half."

Mike heard the phone ringing and Will answering it.

"Hi, Mom. Yeah, she's fine. No. No, I went home with her. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin are coming here, too. Jonathan had to go to work. Okay. I'll see you soon, then. Love you. Bye."

"What did your mom say?" Mike asked, coming out of Will's room.

"She started asking me how El was feeling and whether or not I was helping. And she's coming home."

"Your... your family's really close to El's, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess." He shrugged.

She prefers Will over you, Wheeler. You idiot.

"El's hiding under the blanket on her bed."

"I'm going to make her something to eat. Could you sit with her for a little while?"

"S-sure."

Will stared at the toaster as the Eggo waffles cooked. To the outsider, he seemed calm, cool, and collected, but on the inside? He was *furious*. Stacey (because who the fuck *else* would go so far as to cut another girl's hair?!) had hurt his sister. El had told him that she'd been growing it out for years, that she wanted to have long hair, and now it was ruined for her. Hell, Will would've been mad whether El was his sister or not! He was grateful that Mike was there to comfort El so that Will could keep a handle on his anger. Mike got mad enough for the both of them. That was just the way it worked—Mike was a passionate, emotional person and Will was the peacemaker. It had been that way since kindergarten and they both knew it.

"You're making waffles?" inquired Dustin as he came into the kitchen.

"Yeah. Eggos are her favorite, and I figured she'd appreciate her favorite food. Can you get me the whipped cream and chocolate syrup from the fridge?"

Dustin handed him the items he'd asked for and Will arranged the waffles carefully on the plate before adding the whipped cream and chocolate syrup. He then started making more after handing the plate to Dustin to bring to El, which Dustin didn't. Instead, he headed down the hall.

"A gift for Lady Hopper!" announced Dustin, coming into Will's room.
"Eggo waffles!"

"A Triple-Decker Eggo Extravaganza?" El asked, poking her head out. Mike smiled at her and Dustin smirked knowingly at his friend.

"Yeah. You wanna come out and eat with us? Mrs. Byers is on her way home."

El got up and Mike wasn't far behind her as they went into the dining room. Will was in the middle of making a third stack of waffles and Lucas was setting out the two plates that had already been made. She sat down and Mike took the seat to her left as Will set out the third plate and began working on the last two.

"What's the story with this?" Lucas inquired of El.

"It's kind of stupid, but... when I was little, I felt sad a lot because I don't have a mom." Her eyes darted towards Will for a moment; thankfully, no-one noticed. "So, this one Mother's Day, I was really upset. I think I was like four or five. But my favorite food has always been Eggo waffles, so when my dad saw how upset I was, he made me some. A stack of three waffles covered in whipped cream and chocolate syrup. He called it a Triple-Decker Eggo Extravaganza and now, I just have one whenever I'm sad. It helps me feel better."

"I'm glad that it helps," Mike told her gently.

"I just hope that this all blows over." She started to eat her waffles as Will set out a fourth plate and there was the crunching of tires on gravel.

Joyce was home.

The front door opened and she came into the kitchen.

"El, honey, I'm so sorry," she breathed.

"It's... it's just hair."

"I know, but... they shouldn't have done this."

"It was Stacey, wasn't it?" Will asked in a low voice. El stared at him. "Stacey, Norah, and Libby?"

"Y-yeah."

Dustin whirled around and marched down the hall to Will's room. A few moments later, they could hear muffled screaming. El felt bad for him because she knew he had something of a crush on Stacey. And this incident was sure to crush that crush.

"Okay, El. I'm going to be taking you down to get your hair fixed in a little while. Your dad knows where I'm taking you, so don't worry about it. For now, just enjoy your waffles."

El nodded and took another bite.

Mike, on the other hand, felt a little suspicious. The way Joyce was interacting with El was similar to how she treated Will whenever he was being messed with by Troy. As if El were her daughter instead of the daughter of a friend. If it weren't for the fact that El spent so much time at the Byers, Mike would've written it off as Joyce being a caring mother to all her son's friends. But there was something else there, a connection like that between Will and El but more maternal.

Will likes El as much as I do and his mom knows.

That's what it is.

He felt his heart dropping.

What else could it be?

tries to write effective 80s bullying and fails

OH WELL

I can write it when it's between the guys, but between girls? All I can do for that is cyberbullying... which wasn't a thing in 1983.

Mike be jealous for no reason.

El is sad.

Will is frustrated.

Lucas and Dustin are confused.

YAY

So long and thanks for all the fish!

5. Brother and Sister

Following the 'library incident', as they taken to calling it, Stacey and her two minions had received detention and Stacey had received suspension from the cheerleading squad for being the one to actually cut El's hair. As a result, however, all three girls had it out for El and the Party had begun to take measures to ensure she would never be alone where they could corner her. What helped was the fact that Jennifer Hayes—disgusted by the way her 'friends' had acted and feeling guilty because she hadn't been able to stop it—had begun to keep El company in the library during the last period of the day.

Mike, on the other hand, was struggling. He was still desperately crushing on El and couldn't help but feel jealous whenever he saw Will and El interacting. He'd even watched Will give her a piggyback into the Byers house once when El's shoes had mysteriously disappeared (later found in a mud puddle where they'd been dropped by a stray dog). Mike *hated* himself for feeling jealous. It wasn't fair to El or to Will. But how could he be happy for Will when his own heart felt like it was being torn in half by a Demogorgon?

Thankfully, Halloween arrived and Mike was feeling excited.

Or at least, he was until his mom brought down the camera.

Mike let out a groan as his mother insisted on taking pictures.

"Mom, I have to meet up with the others!"

"Just a second, sweetheart—you look so handsome!"

"MOM!"

Currently, the middle Wheeler sibling was dressed as Han Solo for Halloween. With El joining their group, they could finally do a good Star Wars group costume. Will was Luke and El was Leia (which had resulted in secretive giggling on their end when it was decided), with Dustin playing the part of Chewie and Lucas as Darth Vader. All together, they had a solid dynamic that would be sure to get them lots of candy. El's shorter hair had even allowed her to do better Leia

buns on the side of her head, painstakingly arranged by Joyce.

The doorbell rang and Karen dashed to answer it. El was standing there with Will and Mike felt the familiar pang of jealousy that always accompanied that sight. But he couldn't help but admit that Will made a much better Luke than he could have. Besides, El looked amazing and he chose to focus on that instead of his emotions. Her caramel-brown eyes really popped thanks to the mascara and eyeliner she'd applied and he found himself getting lost in them for a moment before Will cleared his throat and Mike was reminded that El was most likely dating Will.

Even if he hadn't said as much.

"You kids have fun!" chirped Karen. "Be home by nine!"

"Bye, Mom!" Mike called, rushing out the door with Will and El in tow.

"You look great, Mike," Will said, smiling.

"Thanks. Your costumes are great, too."

Once they met up with Dustin and Lucas, trick-or-treating became a lot more fun. Mike let himself forget about his emotions for a few hours while they tried to accumulate as much candy as humanly possible. The fact that El and Will looked ten instead of twelve helped them quite a bit—though Mike was slightly offended when one woman chided him for trying to date his sister. El had burst out laughing and explained gently that no, Mike wasn't her brother. The sound of her laughing made him smile right back.

It wasn't until they went back to the Wheelers and Jonathan picked El up that he was reminded how hopeless his whole... situation with her was. She was into Will, plain and simple, and honestly he couldn't blame her. Will was quieter, nicer, and much more talented. Not to mention he had that whole sensitive-artist thing going for him, which El obviously liked. He was the type of person that you always wanted to have around because he was just so great. And he had a big heart.

I bottle things up until I explode instead of sharing how I feel. All I'm good at is school and Dungeons & Dragons. I'm overly skinny and I'm all limbs. I'm Frog-face Wheeler. She has a connection with Will that I don't have with her. And he knows things about her that I don't, even though we're not supposed to keep secrets.

He went over to the calendar—now changed to November—and lifted it to reveal December. His mother had written *Snow Ball!* on December 17 and his heart dropped. He'd planned to ask El to go with him until the 'library incident' and then any ideas of that went out the window along with his prospects of dating her. But it seemed like Will and El weren't really dating, either. They liked each other, sure, but Will didn't seem like the type to ask a girl out without help.

And—no matter how much it broke Mike's heart—it was the best friend's job to help.

He'd help Will and El get together.

"Mike's acting weird."

Will looked at his sister, who was staring at their bedroom ceiling.

(After all, for all intents and purposes, the room was becoming El's as much as Will's.)

"What do you mean?"

"He keeps avoiding me for no reason, and he hasn't sat by me at lunch all week. You said he liked me. And if that's why he's being all awkward now, then why'd it take so long?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's something else going on."

"I think we should tell them the truth about us." He got up and sat next to her as she sat upright. "We've known we're twins for almost *two months*, and we're used to it."

"How can we tell them?"

"Maybe after the next campaign is over? Mike's been pretty obsessed

with that..."

"Good idea." Will nodded in agreement. "He's keeping a lot of it closely guarded, which means that it's going to be a crazy one. Finishing it will make us all a little... excited."

And on November 6, they made it over to the Wheelers early in the morning. The campaign began and the twins forgot all about revealing their secret to the others until Karen called down the stairs that Hopper was there to take El home. Will insisted that his sister go on ahead so he could talk to Mike before biking home himself. His best friend had been noticeably off all week and he wanted an explanation.

"What's going on with you?" Will asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You *like* El. And you're avoiding her."

"I'm *not*!"

"You don't sit by her at lunch, you swapped places with Dustin at the D&D table, and when she told you goodbye tonight, you didn't even look at her!"

"It's... it's stupid. Me liking her was stupid." Will narrowed his eyes; if Mike broke El's heart...

"Why was it stupid?"

"Because she doesn't feel the same way, all right?" Blinking, Will thought he must've misheard him.

"What are you talking about?"

"She likes *you*. You guys spend almost all your time together. She's slept over at your house more in the past two months than I have in seven years. And she looks to *you* to comfort her when she's upset. It's obvious she's not into me because she's into you. And you feel the same way about her."

Will felt like punching himself in the head.

"Mike, trust me. That's not true. I don't like her that way. Our parents are *friends*."

"Yeah... but you guys know stuff about each other. You keep secrets and..." Mike took a deep breath. "You're not supposed to keep secrets."

"Okay, I've told her some stuff I haven't told anybody else, but that's because she understands. She can keep her mouth shut and doesn't make fun of me for the kind of shit I've told her. Not like you and Dustin and Lucas." Mike opened and closed his mouth. "It has *nothing* to do with me liking her. And she likes *you*. Trust me."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Positive. Why don't you ask her to the Snow Ball or something? That's next month and I'm sure she'd love to go." Mike nodded.

"I'll ask her tomorrow, before school."

"Great." Will started to walk his bike down the driveway, then stopped and turned to face Mike. "And Mike? If you hurt her, I won't hesitate to beat your ass."

"If I hurt her, you have my permission to beat my ass."

Satisfied, Will headed off down the street.

It was the last time he'd be seen for days.

The next morning, El woke up to slight pain in her body. *Will's pain*, she thought. Ever since they'd found out they were twins, some kind of telepathy and empathy had joined the connection between them. They could sense each other's pain and emotional distress, which was why El knew something was off. Then she shook her head; Will had probably fallen off his bike and she was getting whatever was left after the night before. It had happened shortly after they found out they were twins.

Then while she was finishing breakfast (Eggos and bacon with toast), the phone rang.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Hi, El, baby. Is... is your brother there?"

"Which one?"

"Will. He wasn't in his bed this morning and Karen said he left the Wheelers last night, so I figured he went home with you."

"He's not here. He wanted to talk to Mike, so he told Dad to go on ahead and he'd bike home."

"Oh, God!"

"Mom..."

"I've called everywhere else. El, your brother is missing."

El's hand shook as the news washed over her. Her twin brother was missing. She'd felt he was in pain and she'd written it off as him being clumsy.

"El. Sweetheart, I'm going to call your father. Jonathan's stopping by to bring you to—"

"I'm *not* going to school when my twin is missing!"

"No, he's bringing you here. I... I need you and Jonathan home right now."

"Okay... okay..." El tried not to let the tears spill from her eyes. "I'll see you soon."

"Good. All right. I love you, baby, okay?"

"Okay, Mom. I love you, too."

She set the phone back in its cradle and tried her hardest to calm down. Failing that, she sat down by the door and buried her face in her knees, sobbing for the brother who was missing. It was her fault,

plain and simple. She should've waited last night. She should've demanded that they take Will home, too. They should've told the Party the truth about their connection. But they didn't, and her brother was missing, and she didn't know what to do. She couldn't focus.

The next thing she knew, Jonathan was carrying her to the car and setting her in the passenger seat. He put his hand over hers and she could see he was crying, too. She knew Jonathan blamed himself as much as she blamed herself and it was just what people did in situations like these.

"We have to be strong," Jonathan croaked as he drove. "For Mom. She's... she's not doing too well so far."

"For Mom," El agreed, nodding and swallowing.

"Can... can you feel him?"

"Yeah. I felt him when I woke up this morning, but... I-I thought he'd just fallen off his bike again."

Their family was well aware of Will and El's connection and they were grateful for it. The twins were so much more able to care for each other when they could sense each other the way they could. Jonathan just thought it was kind of cool that his brother and sister could basically track each other with their minds. And he'd been filled in on how Will had found El on the day of the 'library incident'.

And he knew she could help them now.

"Will you calm *down*?!"

Lucas glared at Mike, clearly annoyed.

"Sorry, I'm just... I need to talk to El."

"You finally going to ask her out?" Dustin teased.

"To the Snow Ball."

"Oh, *Jesus!* Seriously?!"

"I talked to Will last night and he told me to go for it."

"Wait, I thought Will and El were basically dating."

"No, he cleared that up. They're just friends."

"Okay, but there's something weird about them. Like... how did Will know where El was that day with Stacey? And how does El always know when Troy's being a dick to Will? I'm telling you, they have telepathy."

"Uh, *no*," Lucas snorted.

Will and El didn't show up at all. Not being dropped off by Jonathan or anything. Then Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were brought to the A/V room to check out the new HAM radio that Mr. Clarke had gotten. Mike was so excited that he completely forgot that two members of the Party were missing until it was lunchtime and they still had yet to make an appearance.

Then the bomb dropped.

Will was missing.

As soon as school was over, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas bolted to the bike rack to head to the Byers. They didn't care if they'd get in trouble for going over there without asking first. Hopper had already questioned them to find out if they knew anything (they didn't) and he'd mentioned that El was staying with Joyce to help her through Will's disappearance. Mike's heart was pounding as he dropped his bike and approached the front door, stopping when he heard El yelling.

"...help!"

"El, he's already missing. We don't need to lose *you*, too!"

"But—"

"Please, sweetheart. He'd want you to stay safe."

"He'd want me to *help find him!* He's *hurt* and it's bad, I can feel it! I can find him!"

I can feel it.

Dustin's comment about telepathy suddenly seemed less crazy.

"El, I lost him! I can't lose you, too!"

"And it's *my fault!* I should've told him to ride with Dad! I should've waited for him to finish talking to Mike! I'm..." He could hear sobbing in her words. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mom."

Mom.

The simple word hits him like a freight train, but he forces himself to keep listening.

"El, this is *not your fault.* I need you to stay inside. Hop will find him. I promise."

"Will and I—we just found out we're twins. How can this have happened before we told the others?"

Twins. Will and El are twins.

Not able to take it anymore, Mike knocked on the door. He heard El yelp and footsteps approaching. Joyce opened up and her face was cracked with worry. Wordlessly, she let the boys inside and Mike caught sight of El.

She was a wreck. Her eyes were rimmed with red and her hair—normally so put-together and well-managed despite her curls—was sticking up everywhere. Her clothes were rumpled and a few tearstains were on her shirt. She wasn't the happy-go-lucky El he knew and loved but he didn't care. He launched himself forward and wrapped her in a tight hug, which she reciprocated after a few seconds of shock.

"Mike," she whimpered, burying her face in his shoulder.

"He'll come back, El."

"You heard, didn't you?"

"Yeah..."

"We were going to tell you all, last night, at the end of the campaign..."

"No, that doesn't matter." He gripped her tighter and completely ignored the fact that her mother was in the room. And his two best friends who weren't missing.

El needed comfort.

"Mike."

El scrunched up her face as he lazily swatted at her hand.

"Mike, come on!"

It had been two days since Will went missing and El was starting to get desperate. She'd just escaped Joyce's watch by insisting that she needed to spend time with Mike and the others to help her cope (something that Joyce had agreed to, thank God) and Karen had been more than happy to let her in. But now El was putting part two of her plan into action, and she had to be careful.

Hence why she was waking Mike up.

"Mike, come on. We have to go."

He mumbled in his sleep and she came up with an idea. A very stupid but possibly very *effective* idea that might get him up. She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Bingo.

Mike's eyes shot open and he looked at her.

"D-did you just—what—I... El? What's going on?"

"Eloquent. Get your shoes on. We're going."

"Going? Going where?"

"Where do you *think*?" He opened and closed his mouth in shock. "Come on. Let's go. I'll have to ride with you since my bike is back at Mom's."

He sat up and slid his feet into his shoes before putting on a jacket. She proceeded to wake up Dustin and Lucas—both of whom required nothing but gentle shaking. Mike felt his cheeks go red; he'd been so intently focused on his dreams that El had to kiss him awake like some fairy-tale bullshit. Within a couple minutes, Lucas and Dustin were ready to go and El sat behind Mike on his bike.

"Mirkwood," she stated. "Head that way."

None of them questioned her and they headed off in the direction she'd stated. For now, the Mage was in charge instead of the Paladin. And Mike was completely and totally okay with that because she was their Will-tracker.

She'd explained it a bit earlier.

"It's kind of like telepathy. We can pick up on each other's emotions or pain. That's how I know when Troy's picking on him. The closer we get, the more intense it feels. Basically, I'm a Will-tracker and the more I feel him, the closer I am to wherever he is."

El slid off Mike's bike as soon as they reached the spot where Will's had been found on November 7. Thunder crackled overhead and she stiffened; her childhood astraphobia hadn't faded and storms made her nervous. Usually, she'd be at the Byers when a storm was happening and Will would hold her hand until she fell asleep, but that wasn't possible now. Shaking her head, she tried to push through it and into the trees. She could hear Mike and the others behind her, trying to keep up.

Will's pain was still prevalent in her own body.

I'm coming, Will.

Hurry...

His voice in her head made her stop.

"El, what's wrong?" Mike asked.

"I... I heard him. In my head."

"Telepathy—common between twins," Dustin stated.

"That's bullshit," snorted Lucas.

"Then how do you explain them being able to sense each other?"

"Um..."

"Exactly. Twin telepathy."

She headed in a direction and felt the pain intensify slightly. She was going the right way. Rain started to pour and she regretted not bringing a jacket. Will always wore one in the fall, according to Joyce, since storms tended to spring up suddenly.

But she didn't care about the storm.

All that mattered was Will.

hides

So long and thanks for all the fish!

6. Friendship and Love

Joyce couldn't sleep.

It was for a variety of reasons, not the least of which being that her youngest son was missing, but she had a feeling in her gut that something was wrong. And that feeling seemed to point to El. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to tell herself to calm down, that nothing was wrong, but the feeling wouldn't go away. So, in a moment of need, she went to the phone and dialed the number for the Wheelers. El was there. Joyce just needed the reassurance that her daughter was safe.

"Hello?" Karen Wheeler answered sleepily.

"Hi, Karen. It's Joyce. I'm just wondering if I could talk to El for a moment?"

"Of course. Give me a minute." There was the slight click of the phone being set on a table. Joyce waited for Karen to come back.

Nothing's wrong. El will talk to you and it'll be fine.

"Joyce?!" Karen sounded panicked.

"What?! What's wrong?!"

"El and the boys—they're gone! They're not in the basement and their bikes aren't here!"

"God—oh my God, they probably went to look for Will. Oh, no... no... Karen, I'm so sorry. El roped them into this. She and Will, they're—"

"Twins. Michael told me. And he told me how close they are. She probably just didn't want to go alone and that's why the boys went with her." The Wheeler matriarch took a deep breath. *"I'm going out to look."*

"Wait at your house. I'm going, too. My daughter's out there. I already lost my son."

"All right. They're so grounded..."

Mike noticed El stiffen as thunder cracked overhead. She put a hand on a nearby tree to steady herself, her curls soaked and straightened thanks to the rain. He could remember Will mentioning once that El was afraid of storms, particularly loud thunder, and he felt a certain degree of awe and respect towards her for facing her fears like this. But then his body moved of its own accord and he was gripping her hand to try and comfort her.

"You're soaked," he stated.

"Not going home until we find Will." She screwed up her face and he could tell she was trying to dampen the pain that flowed through her body—Will's pain. He was hurt and out in this storm and El was determined to find him alive.

"Yeah, but—here." He shrugged off his own jacket and put it on her. Considering her small size, it practically swallowed her, but she looked grateful.

"Thank you."

The four of them kept walking and eventually, El stopped again. This time, Mike could tell the pain was overwhelming her. It was obvious in the way that her movement was stilted and awkward.

"Will!" she called.

El, hurry.

His voice was in her head again.

I'm trying. It hurts.

You can do this. I can feel you; you're not far.

We're coming.

She was only able to go for another ten yards before she collapsed, the pain overwhelming her. Dustin, Lucas, and Mike all ran to help

her, Dustin even lifting her into his arms so she didn't have to walk anymore. El was barely able to send them in the right direction before it all became too much and she passed out.

"Shit," Dustin whispered.

"WILL!" Mike yelled. "WHERE ARE YOU?!"

Suddenly, his long legs slipped out from underneath him and he fell down a steep embankment. He managed to avoid hitting the rocks that littered the landscape and landed at the bottom.

"Fuck," he hissed, holding his leg. It was burning with pain, but then something occurred to him.

If he'd fallen down this embankment and hurt himself, then who was to say the same hadn't happened to Will?

"WILL!" He scrambled to his feet.

"MIKE, ARE YOU OKAY?!" Dustin called down.

"I'M FINE! MAKE SURE EL STAYS SAFE!"

He proceeded to look around before a soft groan met his ears. Heart pounding, Mike went in the direction of the sound and found Will lying under a rocky outcropping. He was pale and seemed sick, with dried blood on his arm and temple and his right leg bent awkwardly, but he was *alive*. His eyes were closed and Mike ran over as much as his own hurt leg would allow to shake him awake.

"Will, wake up," he whispered. "Please, wake up."

"M-Mike...?" he mumbled, his eyes half-opening. "What're you doing...?"

"Bringing you home. You need to go to the hospital. Come on; your sister's worried."

"How do you know she's my sister...? We promised not to tell, and friends don't lie."

"Yeah, but come on." Mike lifted his friend—who was far lighter after a couple days without food—and strained against his own injury as he tried to find a way to get Will up to the others.

"She loves you, you know," Will mumbled. He was burning up despite the rainy weather and Mike knew that he had a fever. "Ellie loves you lots. She told me."

"Did she, now...?" Mike was taking anything Will said with a grain of salt because it was likely due to feverish delirium.

"She just won't tell you because you have to say it first. She promised. But I didn't, so go tell her and be happy."

"I'll ask her to the Snow Ball once you're better."

"Mike!" Lucas called, spotting him from a distance and running over. "Let me help. You're hurt, too."

"Just a bruise," Mike insisted. "Will's more important. Did El wake up?"

"No, but I think we need to get Will out of here as soon as possible. He's sick. Really sick."

"Not sick," mumbled Will as Mike passed him to Lucas. He limped towards where Dustin was waiting with El and the five began making their way to where the bikes had been left, Mike carrying El to give Dustin a break.

Of course, when they got close, they noticed a *very familiar* police cruiser waiting with their respective mothers. Joyce's face broke into relieved happiness when she saw her twin babies alive—not in the best condition, but alive. Karen was immediately stricken with worry when she noticed that Mike was limping, and Claudia Henderson and Anna Sinclair rushed over to grab their own sons.

"El. El, baby, wake up," whispered Joyce, taking her daughter from Mike.

"M-Mama...?" El murmured, still slightly out of it. "Where's Will? I can feel him..."

"Will's going to the hospital. You found him."

"I fell asleep."

"And Mike brought you home." El smiled.

"He's nice... and pretty. I like him."

Mike turned pink at El complimenting him (albeit indirectly and while she was half-asleep, but still). Maybe Will's fevered mumblings had more truth to them than he'd thought.

He was still going to wait to ask El to the Snow Ball, though...

Will opened his eyes to see blinding white above him.

For half a second, he thought he was dead until he heard the telltale beep of an EKG nearby and the whirl of hospital equipment. Looking to the left and right, he could see El curled up in a chair wearing a jacket he recognized as Mike's and their mother sleeping next to her. He was in the hospital. He was safe and not hiding under a rocky outcropping in the woods anymore. His throat was less dry—meaning they'd gotten fluids into him—and he was okay. Despite the raging headache and the dull feeling in his temple, leg, and arm that told him he was on painkillers.

How long was I out?

As if she heard him, El's eyes opened and landed on him, lighting up like a Christmas tree. The movement woke their mother, who looked just as startled before she realized the cause of El's excitement.

"Will, you're awake!" she breathed, hugging her younger son. "How are you feeling, baby?"

"Sore. How did I get here?"

"Mike found you," El replied. "We went out in the rain and Mike hurt his leg but he found you and Lucas carried you to the edge of the woods. I ended up passing out from feeling *your* pain."

"Jesus. How's it going to be for me when you get cramps?"

His sister burst out laughing and he and their mother joined in. Even though it hurt his head and his side to laugh. Jonathan poked his head in and smiled before heading back out. Within minutes, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin arrived with relieved expressions on their faces.

"You're okay," Mike sighed, smiling.

"Yeah. Thanks for coming to get me."

"Thank El," Dustin stated, gesturing to the one female member of the Party. "She's the one who woke us up and tracked you using your freaky twin telepathy."

"So... you guys know?"

"Yeah. It's cool that you wanted to keep it a secret though—*totally* get it. At least now we know why you and El are attached at the hip as much as you are."

"Even *if* you broke Party rules," added Lucas. "You were planning on telling us, according to El, so that makes it better."

Will smiled, glad that his friends didn't resent him suddenly having a sister. He also noted that Mike's eyes were on El, who was talking animatedly while still wearing their taller friend's jacket. If Will had to guess, Mike had probably lent it to El while they were in the rain and she'd just forgotten to give it back. Several of Will's sweaters had migrated to the cabin in the same way and if Mike would just ask El out, the middle Wheeler kid's clothes would probably be heading the same direction.

"How much trouble are you guys in?" Will asked, smirking at his friends.

"Grounded for two weeks," Lucas sighed.

"Same," Dustin added.

"Mom thought I'd been punished enough by hurting my leg," Mike said with a shrug.

"And your sister's been sick with worry for the past few days, so she's just going to have a few extra chores at the cabin and our house."

El made a face but didn't protest, knowing she'd screwed up and had to pay the price now.

"I'm going to get some coffee," Joyce announced, stretching. "El, why don't you and the boys come with me and let Will rest for a few minutes?"

"Okay, Mom." El followed her, as did Dustin and Lucas, leaving her brother alone.

With Mike.

The door closed and the two looked at each other, Mike shuffling awkwardly.

"I wanted to talk to you about something, if that's okay."

"Sure. What's up?"

"Well... you told me Sunday that El would like me to ask her to the Snow Ball. And while I was carrying you back, you said she loved me but I had to say it first. Why?" Will's cheeks heated up; he did *not* want to have this conversation right now.

"It's... I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. I get it." Mike nodded. "But... I'm going to ask her. I've decided that I'm going to ask her when you're better and back at home."

"She'll like that. Just... treat her right, okay? She's the only sister I have."

"I will."

When El returned to school on Monday, she found herself surrounded by whispers as her classmates stared at her. She'd taken the rest of the previous week off in order to spend time with Will and help him

recover, and the boys had assured her that they'd keep her and Will's secret for now. But somehow, a rumor had been spread that Will and El were dating and that was why she'd been out the week before. She could feel the eyes on her, burning with curiosity, and fidgeted as she walked into Mr. Clarke's classroom.

"Hey, Hopper!" a voice said behind her. She turned to see Troy and narrowed her eyes. "I heard you're dating Byers. Guess he's not a fairy after all."

"We're *not* dating."

"Then why were you at the hospital so much last week? Because you're his *friend* and your dad let you skip school to hang out with him? I don't think so."

"Hey, leave her alone!" Mike snapped. He'd been running late that morning, hence why he, Dustin, and Lucas hadn't walked her to class.

"I'm just talking, Wheeler."

"So what if she skipped school to hang out with Will? At least she *cares*. You were saying he was dead and it was a good thing."

El's eyes widened. Troy seemed to realize how hurt she was by that statement and tried to defend himself.

"N-no, I didn't say that. I just said he was *probably* dead since they found his bike..."

"I don't believe you," she replied in a cold voice. "You *hate* Will."

Troy shrunk from her gaze and Mike was staring at her.

"What?" she asked.

"N-nothing. How's Will doing, by the way?"

"They released him from the hospital yesterday. He's home now and he'll be back to school within the next few days."

"Great." There was something in the way Mike looked at her that told

her he was planning something, but she chose to ignore it.

The next time she saw them was at lunch, after she'd been bombarded with questions from people in her other classes about her and Will's relationship status. Needless to say, the Mage was annoyed and ready to snap until she sat down and Dustin passed her an envelope.

The hell?

She opened it up and discovered a paper snowflake inside with a message written in Mike's messy scrawl.

Do you want to go to the Snow Ball with me?

—Mike.

"Why didn't he give this to me himself?" she asked her curly-haired friend.

"He's too chickenshit and afraid you'll say no."

"Where is he?"

"Outside the cafeteria, probably having a panic attack. He's had a crush on you since your first day, you know. And he thought you and Will were dating until Will gave him the green light to ask you out."

"I'll be back."

She got up with the snowflake and walked briskly out of the cafeteria, where she found Mike leaning against the wall and looking paler than usual.

"Mike?"

"Oh!" He jumped and then saw her. "E-E! What are you doing out here?"

"Giving you an answer." She pulled a pen out of her pocket and wrote her reply on the snowflake before folding it back up neatly and handing it to him. "Come in and eat, okay? Then you can come visit

Will after school."

She disappeared back into the cafeteria. Mike unfolded the snowflake and found a single, three-letter word as El's answer.

Yes.

His heart leapt into his throat and he couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face as he folded the snowflake back up and put it in his pocket. He was going to keep this as a memento of the Snow Ball—even if they hadn't actually gone yet. Still, he walked into the cafeteria to join his friends... and possible girlfriend.

"He asked me today."

"He asked you to the Snow Ball?"

Will glanced at his sister as she stared at the ceiling dreamily. She'd had a faraway look in her eyes all afternoon, and now hearts were added to that faraway look as she sat up to look at him.

"Dustin handed me a paper snowflake asking me to go because Mike was too afraid I'd say no to ask me himself. I ended up just writing my response on the snowflake and handing it back to him when I saw him in the hallway."

She was so excited and Will felt happy for her. At least something came of one of their crushes on Mike. Deep down, he was jealous but he couldn't really blame her for that. The heart wanted what it wanted, and Mike's heart wanted El and El's heart wanted Mike. Will's heart wanted Mike too, but he knew it wasn't going to happen.

Then El coughed and Will knit his eyebrows together with worry.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine." He scooted over and put a hand on his sister's forehead; she was burning up.

"You have a fever. Let me get Jonathan."

"No, Will, I'm fine—" She cut herself off with a coughing fit and Will shook his head.

"*Jonathan!*" he called.

Within seconds, the eldest Byers sibling was in the doorway.

"What's wrong?"

"I think El's sick."

"I am *not!*" she whined, her voice slightly raspy from coughing. Jonathan crossed over to her and pressed a gentle hand to her forehead.

"Jesus, Ellie. You're burning up."

"I'm not sick."

"Yeah. Uh-huh. Come on."

He scooped her up and carried her into the living room—an easy feat given how small she was. While she sat on the couch, pouting as she insisted she was fine, he found the thermometer and stuck it in her mouth. Carefully timing it, he checked her temperature.

102 degrees.

"Ellie, you have a fever. You're sick."

She deflated as she curled up on the couch and he pulled a blanket over her, frowning before going to the bathroom to make her a cold compress.

"Should I sleep in your room tonight?" inquired Will.

"Yeah, that would probably be best. She's got a kind of high fever and you're still recovering from the woods."

"I'll call Mom and Hopper."

"Great. I'll finish making a cold compress to try and cool her down."

Will headed into the hall and grabbed the phone, dialing the number for the station and waiting for someone to pick up.

"Hawkins Police. Flo speaking."

"Hi, Flo. It's Will Byers. Could you put the Chief on the line? It's about El."

"Right away honey. Is she all right?"

"She's coming down with something, but I think she'll be okay."

"Good. Oh, here you go. I'll patch you through."

There was a click and a gruff voice entered the line.

"This is Chief Hopper."

"Hey, Hop. It's Will."

"What's wrong?"

"El's sick. She has a fever and she's coughing, but Jonathan and I are handling it. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks. Let me guess—she tried to deny she was sick even though it was obvious she had a fever."

"Yep."

"Don't let her fool you. She doesn't like people showing her pity, so she tries to downplay any sickness she comes down with."

"Got it. I'm going to call Mom and let her know, too."

"Okay. See you later, kid."

Will dialed Melvald's and quickly got a response from his mother, who was right by the phone at work, apparently.

"Melvald's. Joyce speaking."

"Hi, Mom."

"Oh, hi, Will. You feeling okay?"

"Much better, but El's not having a great time. She has a fever."

"Poor baby. Are you and Jonathan keeping an eye on her?"

"She kept insisting that she was fine until Jonathan took her temperature and made her lie down on the couch."

"I'll be home in a little while. Make sure she's comfortable."

"We will."

"Okay. I'll see you soon, baby. I love you!"

"Love you, too."

He hung up the phone and glanced at El. She had the cold compress on her forehead and looked grumpy at the prospect of being sick.

"Mom's going to be home soon. You'll get better, I promise. And I'll bring your homework tomorrow."

"You better. I'm gonna go crazy here with nothing to do."

Will knew that part of it was the fever talking and smiled.

Tomorrow was a new day.

Okay, so this chapter was going to contain a Will confession to Mike, but I decided against it for story reasons. Also, sickness can sneak up behind you and steal your spinal cord like Sub-Zero. That's how I always get sick—I wake up in the morning and I feel like I'm full of... ick. And I'm also the type of person who doesn't complain about being sick or hurt unless it's really bad. Then I get pathetic.

Anyway, the last part of this chapter was just me wanting to write the Byers siblings together. Jonathan loves his baby sister... even if she's not technically a baby anymore.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

7. New Friends and New Relationships

El ended up sick for the rest of the week. Will had to return to school alone, where a new girl had joined their class and caught the attention of both Dustin and Lucas. Her name was Max Mayfield, and she'd just moved to Hawkins from California. She had fiery red hair and an equally-fiery personality that matched. Mike seemed more than a little annoyed that his two friends were trying to bring her into the group, citing that El was enough and they didn't need another girl in the group.

"You didn't fight it when Will brought El in," Dustin protested.

"Yeah, well, that was *different*."

"Because you *like* El."

"And she's Will's sister!"

"We didn't know that yet!"

"Ugh." Mike slumped back in his seat. "When's El coming back, anyway?"

"She should be back by next week; the doctor said she has strep throat. Her throat's all swollen and the fever's still bad," Will explained with a grimace.

"Damn. Hate to be her," Lucas commented.

"The medicine's working but she can't come back to school yet. She's excited about the Snow Ball, though." Will shot a smirk at Mike. "That was a nice move with the snowflake."

"She told you?!"

"I'm her twin brother, Mike. She tells me everything; you really didn't think she'd tell me you asked her out?"

Mike's face turned pink and he was suddenly very interested in his lunch. Lucas and Dustin started laughing at his embarrassment before

he bit out for them to shut up.

"I don't see anything wrong with asking another girl to join the group," Will continued. "I mean, I love my sister, but she could really use a *girl* to talk about things with. You know, stuff girls and guys really shouldn't talk to each other about?"

"Okay, I agree with Will," Dustin butted in. "C'mon, Mike. Just give her a shot."

"Fine. But if she and El don't get along, she's *out*."

"Deal."

And with that, they started making a plan to include Max into whatever activity they'd be doing next. Which was going to the arcade on Saturday, seeing as El would be better by that point and itching to get out of the house. Mike point-blank refused to write a campaign including Max, though, since they had no idea if she even played D&D, much less her character class. That was fine with the others.

All they could do was plan, though.

El was excited to get out of the house after a week of being on bedrest. Her family had been insistent on her getting rest instead of moving around a lot, so she'd been restless for most of the week. And going to the arcade with her friends? Yes, *please*. Even if she had to catch a ride with Jonathan because Will had spent Friday night over at Mike's and she was the first one at the arcade as a result. She didn't mind. It just meant a little extra time to try and beat scores on Pac-Man and Dustin's high score on Dig Dug.

When she got there, though, the machine was occupied by a girl with red hair. The girl hammered the buttons with a practiced ease that was hypnotic and El couldn't help but watch as the score climbed higher and higher. Before long, the words NEW HIGH SCORE flashed across the screen. Smirking, the girl entered the name MADMAX and whirled around, almost running into El.

"Sorry!" El gasped.

"Nah, it's fine. Were you watching me?"

"Yeah. You completely demolished my friend's score. It was awesome." She stuck out her hand. "I'm El. You?"

"Max." The redhead accepted the handshake. "You go to Hawkins Middle?"

"I do. But I was out sick this past week. Are you new around here?"

"Just moved here from California. But, already, I have a couple stalkers here. They wanted me to hang out with them here today, so I showed up early to get my serious gaming out of the way."

"My brother and our friends are coming here later. I'm excited."

"Did you wanna play?" Max stepped aside and gestured to the machine.

"Yeah. Thanks!"

Instead of leaving, though, Max stood there and helped coach El through the game, racking up the brunette's score until it was higher than Dustin's. She smiled and entered the name ELEVEN, a name she'd come up with for herself when she was at the arcades back in Chicago. And now she and Max went from machine to machine, having a good time together as they tried to beat high scores wherever they could.

Then, as if on cue, the door to the arcade opened and four boys walked in. El smiled even wider than she had been already and ran to hug her brother. And Mike, because she could.

"How's it going?" Dustin asked her.

"I destroyed your score on Dig Dug."

"No!"

"You're in third, now."

"Oh, hey, stalkers," Max greeted them, sidling up beside El. "So which one of you is El's brother?"

Will raised his hand and Max nodded.

"Makes sense. El and I here have been destroying scores at the machines for an hour."

"So you *do* get along." Dustin gave Mike a side-eye and the dark-haired boy rolled his eyes. El tilted her head.

"Why did you think we wouldn't?"

"It's not important," Mike insisted. "C'mon, let's play some games."

"That's so fucking cheesy."

"It's *sweet*."

"Okay, yeah, it's sweet. But it's also *cheesy as hell*."

El giggled at Max flopping over on the bed dramatically.

"Wheeler is so *desperately* head-over-heels for you, it's sickening."

"I think it's cute."

"Of course you do. Because you're just as head-over-heels for *him*."

"Yep. And I can't wait for the Snow Ball." She smiled dreamily and Max gagged.

"Ew. Seriously, you and Wheeler are going to be *disgustingly* in love by the time we're in high school. You two will be that couple that's super-affectionate in public and completely unapologetic about it."

"You really think so?"

"Oh my God. That's *exactly* what you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's great and he's so... amazing."

"How does Will feel about it?"

"He said that he wishes Mike would kiss me and stop pining like an idiot."

"I've known Wheeler less than two weeks and I feel the same way. Seriously, he's been like that since you moved here?"

"Mm-hmm." El kicked her legs. "He and the guys are completely different from everyone I knew in Chicago. You, too. I didn't have friends. The closest I had were my sisters and my older sister's best friend. But considering Kat and Kali are both sixteen and Sarah is three... yeah, it's nice having friends my own age."

"Was it weird to adjust to having a second set of siblings?"

"At first, it was. With Jonathan, I mean. Will and I just kinda clicked from the start; we met on the first day of school and it was like a magnet pulling us towards each other. It's sort of the same with Mike, only with Mike, I can't feel his pain or emotions. That's a Will-exclusive aspect."

"Jesus. Glad I don't have a twin. That must be kind of creepy."

"It helped us find Will when he got lost in the woods. Even if I ended up passing out before we actually found him. Dustin and Mike ended up carrying me out. I think I got sick because I forgot to bring a jacket with me, actually, and Mike lent me his. Shit."

She went over to where she and Will hung their jackets and discovered Mike's was there.

"I forgot to give it back."

"El, you're going to be his girlfriend. It's your *right* to steal his sweaters and jackets and never give them back."

"Really?"

"Not all of them, obviously, but some of them. This is just the first one and you should *totally* wear it to school. Mike would love it."

El's cheeks turned pink and she put on the blue jacket, zipping it up. Max started laughing as she realized that Mike and El already had a significant-enough height difference for it to swallow her. And, based off their respective parents, it was fully possible that Mike would be much much taller in the future and El would remain shorter than him. The image of a six-foot-tall Mike and a five-foot-tall El made Max laugh even harder.

"Max," El whined.

"Sorry, sorry. You guys just have a height difference that's really hilarious if I think about it."

"I'm glad you're my female best friend now."

"I'm not your *best* best friend?"

"That would be Will. Nobody's replacing him."

"Okay, that's fair. Are you sure he's okay with you dating *his* best friend?"

"I hope so. Because I *really* like Mike and I don't want to put Will in an awkward position if something happens."

"If something happens, I'm on your side."

"Thanks, Max."

Will and El pressed themselves against the wall outside Benny's. For the first time in a while, they were hanging out one-on-one, as brother and sister, but this was more than hanging out. This was them spying on Hopper, who El swore was dating somebody but she wasn't sure who. Her brother had been the only person to join her because Mike had to babysit and Lucas, Dustin, and Max were at the arcade. He was *also* curious as to who his twin's adoptive father was seeing, since they both wanted it to be Joyce.

"Is he in there?" whispered El.

"Yeah," Will replied, his voice low so they wouldn't be overheard.

"He's talking to Benny. Nobody's sitting with him yet."

"Let me see!"

She peered through the window and saw Hopper talking to Benny. He was alone, like Will had said, and then she ducked down as her father turned his face towards the window. After a few heart-pounding moments, she and Will peered back in to see somebody sitting down with the Chief and laughing. A brown-haired somebody that the twins knew very well.

Mom.

"He's dating Mom!" squealed El excitedly.

"Maybe they'll get married and we can have our own rooms!"

"What, you don't like sharing with me?"

"I like sharing with you; it's just that we're both going to need our own space. Especially once you and Mike start dating."

"Okay, that's fair." El smiled and grabbed her brother's hand. "C'mon. Let's get some burgers and torture our parents with us knowing they're dating. That sound good?"

"Yes."

They went into Benny's and immediately, Will's eyes connected with his mom's. She stiffened and he knew he'd caught her. Still, the twins made their way over to the table and Hopper looked up with a grimace at being caught.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," El greeted them.

"Hi, sweetheart," Joyce replied.

"Mind if we join you?"

Hopper looked at his daughter and he *knew* she was purposely giving him and Joyce shit. She knew they were on a date and she was teasing them. But, truth be told, the kids had to know eventually.

"Not at all." Will and El slid into the booth—El next to Joyce and Will next to Hopper.

The four of them looked like a family.

December rolled around and Will found his best friend and his twin sister both locked into their own heads. The Snow Ball was fast approaching—that was the reason for their slight hysterics. That was how Will found himself being their support systems while El worried about whether or not her short hair (still having not grown back from the 'library incident') would be easy to style for the event and Mike worried about whether or not El would actually be willing to dance with him. Especially considering Mike Wheeler—despite having knowledge of many, many things—did *not* know how to dance.

"She doesn't know how to dance, either," Will sighed.

(He was okay with Mike and El dating. Mike liked El that way, not Will. He was okay with this. *He was okay with this.*

Even if it felt like something was being stolen from him.

Even if his own twin was the thief.

He was okay with this.)

"She doesn't?"

"No, but she's been asking Mom to teach her. Guess who gets roped into being her partner?"

"Ha." Mike smiled humorlessly. "Jesus. I'm *actually* going to the Snow Ball with my best friend's twin sister."

"Just keep your hands to yourself, okay?"

"What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Sorry, but Hopper doesn't talk to you that much, which leaves it to me to be the overprotective male family member. Most girls have one." Mike groaned and flopped onto his bed.

"She's gonna think I'm such a fucking wastoid when I try to dance with her..."

"Calm down. That's not going to happen."

Mike nodded and took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

"Um... you don't know what color her dress is, do you?"

"I do, actually. Why?"

"I... I just thought I should bring her something. Like flowers."

"Pink. Like that dress Nancy used to wear."

"The one with the white collar?"

"I heard my name," Nancy called from the doorway. "What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Mike answered quickly.

"We're just discussing the Snow Ball," Will told her. "Mike has a—"

To silence the younger Byers boy, Mike threw a pillow at his face, but it was too late. Nancy knew what Will had been saying and her face lit up.

"Mike, you have a *date*?!"

"Yeah..."

"That's big news! Oh, *please* tell me it's El. The way you're smitten with her is adorable."

"Yes, it's El. Leave me alone now."

"Aw, *Mike*! I guess now's a good time to let you know that I'll be volunteering at the dance, right?"

"Kill me now..."

On the day of the Snow Ball, Mike found himself the subject of dozens of pictures taken by his mother while they waited for Will and El to arrive. Jonathan was driving Mike and Nancy to the dance, too, so it only made sense. Plus Karen wanted pictures of her son and his date to his first school dance, so there was that. She adjusted Mike's tie and stepped back, smiling with approval before taking out her camera and taking a couple more pictures.

"Mom, they're gonna be here soon!"

"Just a second, sweetie! Smile—you look so handsome!"

"Mom!"

The doorbell rang and Karen rushed to open the door, where Jonathan was waiting with the twins. El's hair had been carefully styled and a blue barrette kept it away from her face. Her dress was a pale blue with a pink sash and tiny pink dots all over it and she smiled at Karen, who put a hand over her heart.

"Michael's in the family room," she stated. "I want pictures of you two together."

"You want me to take them, Mrs. Wheeler?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh, would you? I can *never* get Michael to look good in photos, no matter how hard I try..." She handed her camera to the teenager, who went into the family room with his younger siblings in tow. She didn't fail to miss the look in Mike's eyes when he saw El, his face lighting up with a dumbfounded smile.

"Pretty..." he blurted, turning pink. El's cheeks darkened but she was smiling, too. Karen wanted to squeal at how simply *adorable* it was.

"Okay, stand together," Jonathan stated, waving his hand. Nancy appeared in the doorway, a smile gracing her lips as she watched her brother actually look decent in photos for once in his life. After a few more, it was time to go and Karen straightened Mike's tie one last time.

"Have a good time, sweetheart!"

"Bye, Mom." The five headed out to the car and Mike found himself squeezed between El and Will, Nancy claiming the front seat before any of the younger kids could.

Upon heading into the dance itself (handing their tickets over to Mr. Clarke as they did so), they discovered much of the Hawkins Middle student body had already arrived. Mike froze as El grabbed his hand and pulled him across the room with her, to where Lucas and Max were talking. Dustin showed up a few minutes later, hair looking like a bird had nested in it and getting shit from the guys for it.

"It looks okay, right, El?" he asked.

"You look like Steve Harrington's little brother," she stated simply.

"Yes. That's what I was going for. He's the one who taught me to do my hair like this."

"Well, you should punch him," Max snorted. "It does *not* suit you. Like, at *all*."

"Screw you, Mayfield."

"Time After Time" started playing over the speakers and Dustin went off to find a girl to dance with. Max and Lucas went out on the dancefloor together and before El could move, a girl she didn't know walked up to Will.

"Hey, do you wanna dance?" she asked.

"U-uh..." Will looked from his best friend to his sister for support.

Ellie, help me. I'm too young and gay for this shit.

Oh no, you're on your own. It won't kill you.

"Okay." He and the girl went out on the dancefloor and Mike swallowed nervously.

"So... um... you wanna dance?" he asked her.

"I... honestly, I don't know how."

"I don't, either. Do you wanna figure it out?"

Together, they went out and he put his hands on her waist, El putting her arms around his neck as the music shifted to "Every Breath You Take". Mike's breathing hitched at the feel of her so close, so close and paying attention only to him. She was the prettiest person he'd ever seen in his life—even though he *was* only twelve. Her caramel brown eyes, brown curls, and smile had drawn him in and the person she was closed the gate for him.

You should kiss her, said a little voice in his head.

For a second, he hesitated. Then he leaned down (he was a few inches taller, after all) and pressed his lips to hers, ever so gently. And then she was kissing him back and that was all that mattered to him in that moment. Pulling apart, she smiled and rested her head on his shoulder. *God*, he was lucky right now. Will had somebody to dance with, Max and Lucas were doing their thing, and—*oh dear God was Dustin dancing with Nancy?*

"What the hell?" he whispered. El followed his line of sight and started giggling. "Isn't there an unspoken rule about this shit?"

"You broke that rule, dummy, remember?"

"Okay, true, but... we didn't know until like a month ago."

"That's fair."

The song changed again and the Party met up off the dancefloor. Mike immediately accosted Dustin, who insisted Nancy had asked *him* and not the other way around.

"Besides, weren't you locking lips with El out there?" snickered Max.

El felt Will's emotional distress before it cracked across his face for the briefest of moments. Nobody noticed but her, and guilt flooded through her being.

It's not fair. He can't... he can't be with Mike like I can...

Oh, Will...

Ooh, problems.

Yeah, so sorry this took a while. I hit a wall trying to introduce Max a year early, but I think it turned out all right.

Mike and El aren't quite together yet, though; Will is the only obstacle on that front, even if Mike doesn't know it. But El feels guilty because Will liked Mike first and she feels like she's stealing him.

Next time: time-skips and high school because I'm a jerk.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

8. Timeskips and Sisters

"When's Mike getting here?"

"He'll be here in ten minutes, El. Calm down."

Will watched his sister fidget uncomfortably. He knew that she wasn't dealing well with... recent developments (wearing a bra and the clips that came with it). And the thought of seeing Mike again after a summer away from him was making her more happy than Will had seen her all summer.

They were fourteen now and getting ready to start high school. That meant it had been two years since El had moved to Hawkins and just a little less than that since they'd found out they were twins. Word had gotten out somehow. It was now common knowledge in Hawkins that Will and El were brother and sister. It was solidified by the fact that Hopper and Joyce had gotten married and moved the family into a house a few blocks away from Mike's. El and Will and Jonathan all had their own rooms instead of sharing.

(Will was especially grateful once El started wearing bras.)

Now, though, they were waiting for Mike and the others to come over so that they could all hang out. The Paladin had been out of town all summer at his grandparents' house in Florida, so they needed to catch up, too.

There was a knock at the door and El leapt up to open it. Dustin, Lucas, and Max were outside and she let them in. A couple minutes later, there was another knock. This time, it was Mike and he quickly pulled El into a hug as soon as he saw her. She let out a squeal; he was taller than her and now he was able to lift her off the ground. Will couldn't help but smile sadly at how stinking adorable it was and how much he wished it could've been *him* that Mike was lifting in a massive hug. Then he noticed a confused look on Mike's face, followed by it turning slightly red and Will knew that Mike was noticing that El was significantly softer in the chest region now.

"Hey, let the rest of us hug him, too!" Dustin protested, and El

released her hold on Mike to let everyone else attack him before he glanced around the room.

"This is the new place?" he asked the twins.

"Yep," El replied. "Will and I have our own rooms now—"

"Which will be convenient when you and El make out," Max interjected, earning a throw pillow to the shoulder from her best friend.

"Max!"

"What?"

Will's mouth dried. Mike hadn't just gotten taller; he'd gotten more attractive, too. And he still only had eyes for El. But Will was still going to pretend it didn't hurt because he wanted Mike to be happy. If being with Will's twin made him happy, then so be it.

Curiously, though, El and Mike weren't together. She'd never said why and it bothered Will that El wasn't letting Mike take her on dates and the like. It wasn't because she didn't like him—Will knew she did—but it was more like she wasn't with Mike for some strange reason. He wished he could see into her head more, but they'd been working on blocking each other out ever since El got her first period in January and Will ended up feeling her cramps. Neither of them wanted that to happen every month. With this dampened physical connection also came the fact that they couldn't sense each other's emotional state as well. Or maybe it was because El was a girl and 'girls are more emotionally complicated', as she'd said. Will just wished she'd be with Mike so he didn't have to see his best friend/crush going through that emotional torture.

Mike, like any rational teenager, was worried about high school.

He was worried about harder classes and being kicked to the bottom of the social ladder again, but more than that, he was worried about losing El. Going to high school meant that there would be a lot more people, a lot of other people who might snap up a pretty, bubbly,

smart girl like her and take her in another direction—so much so that her only connection to her former friends in the Party would be her brother. And while it hadn't happened in middle school, it could happen in high school. He wasn't worried about Max because her cynicism essentially ensured that she'd be sticking with them for a while. He, Lucas, Dustin, and Will had been together for a long time. But El... she really hadn't had other options. Now she had options.

"El's not going to ditch us!" groaned Dustin. "For one thing, who's she going to go to—Stacey? Not after the library incident."

"I... she just has so many more options for friends in high school. What if she stays with the group but then starts dating somebody outside of us? I don't think I could handle it..."

"Mike, I'm saying this as your best friend and her twin brother," Will stated. "El's not going to date anybody else as long as you're available. I don't know why she's not with you yet, but..."

"What about the whole twin telepathy thing?" asked Lucas, raising an eyebrow.

"We've been trying to figure out how to tune each other out since January."

"What happened in January?"

"Simple: I felt the pain when her time of the month came and I don't like it."

"You feel her cramps?"

"Yes. Can we stop talking about it? All you need to know is it hurts about five times worse than getting punched in the gut."

Mike shuddered, glad he didn't have a twin sister.

"Anyway, because of that, the whole 'feeling-what-each-other's-feeling' thing has kind of gone out the window. It's only there if things get... too intense."

"Ew."

"Maybe all you need to do is ask her out *directly*. Not the roundabout way you've been doing it for the past couple years."

"You think so?"

"Be direct and she'll say yes."

"Okay." Mike took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah. You're right."

"Oh, thank *God*," sighed Dustin. "This was getting ridiculous."

"Wait, you all think I need to be more direct?"

"*Uh*, yes. You've either chickened out or asked her to go with all of us. That doesn't count as a date."

"Dammit..."

"I can't understand you. Could you talk a little more clearly?"

El blinked sleepily as she entered the kitchen. There was still a week to go until school started and she was trying to wake herself up earlier every day. Today, however, Hopper was on the phone and he was looking concerned.

Must be Terry.

Terry—Hopper's ex-wife and the mother of Kat and Sarah—had gotten sick the year before. Nobody was sure what it was, not even doctors, but it left her bedridden much of the time and dependent on her eldest daughter and her husband, Martin Brenner. It didn't explain why she'd be calling Hopper, though.

"You're sure?" Hopper cringed as El could hear Terry yelling hysterically through the phone. "Okay, okay! Sorry!"

El popped Eggos in the toaster and started it up.

"I can't believe this... who does shit like that? You're not in any condition to take care of Sarah by yourself and Kat's heading off to college. How could he just—" Hopper closed his eyes and took a deep

breath. "Listen, Terry. I'll talk to Joyce when she gets home from work. I think I have an idea. Thanks for calling. Bye."

"What was that about?" El asked.

"Brenner left."

"He... he left Terry?"

"Yeah. And whatever she has is getting worse."

"What's your idea to help her?"

"Well... the doctors are saying that she needs to be kept in a facility so they can treat her more effectively. Sarah wouldn't be able to stay with her, but the facility is in Indianapolis. So..."

"Sarah moves in with us?"

"Exactly. I have to discuss it with your mother, obviously, but... it could help us all out."

And sure enough, when Joyce came home, El waited in her room for the consensus on the plan. Her stomach twisted into knots. She'd never liked Brenner. He was too cold and off-putting for her to like him in any way, shape, or form. Not to mention he treated Kat and Terry like shit—a mental and emotional abuser. Sarah was spared because she was so much younger than Kat, but that didn't mean that she'd never get any of that treatment. El hoped that Joyce would agree to it. She wanted to see her little sister again and make things easier for her Chicago family.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" she called. Joyce opened the door, biting her lip.

"El, honey, could you come downstairs? We have something we need to discuss with you and the boys."

"Okay." El slid off her bed and headed downstairs, where she found Jonathan and Will sitting on the couch. She sat down between them and Joyce and Hopper faced their three kids.

"What's going on?" asked Will.

"Well... Terry's not getting better," Hopper began. "And with Kat going off to college, the doctors want to move her into a facility where they can monitor her better. There isn't anybody to take care of Sarah, so... your mother and I were thinking of letting her live here."

"You mean foster her?" inquired Jonathan.

"Yeah. But we wanted to discuss it with you kids first."

"It's fine with me," El stated. "I'd love to be able to be close to my little sister again."

"I don't have a problem with it," Jonathan added. Will was silent for a moment, then nodded.

"Having another sister would be nice."

"I'll give Terry a call and let her know," Hopper said. Joyce smiled at her three kids.

The day Sarah moved in was a bright and sunny one. Her stuff had been moved into El's room, which the two sisters would be sharing until Jonathan went off to college the following fall. The newest member of the family entered the house and immediately launched herself into El's arms, squealing excitedly.

"Ellie!" she cheered.

"Hey, Sarah! How was the drive from Chicago?"

"Long and *boring*." She scrunched up her face. "All the music sounded weird."

"That's just Dad's taste."

"Hey!" protested Hopper jokingly, carrying Sarah's suitcase that held all her clothes. "I have pretty good taste, little missy."

"In women, maybe. I mean, you married Mom."

"Touché."

"Where are Will and Jonathan?" asked Sarah.

"They're out getting dinner for tonight. Just us."

"Yay!" Sarah bounced up and down before following El upstairs to the room they'd share and smiled broadly.

"You'll have your own room once Jonathan goes off to college."

"Like Kitty?"

"Like Kitty." Sarah frowned as she sat down on her bed and hugged her stuffed tiger.

"Ellie, do you think Papa will come get me?" El sighed.

"Sarah... he might. But we're not going to let him. He doesn't get to be your papa after leaving your mommy like that."

"But isn't my mommy your mommy?"

"No. My mommy is Joyce. She's Will's mommy too. And Hop is my daddy, not my papa."

"Good. I like him more than Papa. He's nicer and he likes to spend time with me. Do you think he'd like it if I called him Daddy?"

"I think he would." She hugged Sarah tightly and the little girl giggled, jokingly shoving her older sister off.

"What's going on in here?" Will asked jokingly from the doorway.

"Will!" Sarah launched herself off the bed and into Will, who almost fell over with the force.

"You're getting big!"

"Am I gonna be as tall as Jonathan one day?"

"Maybe, if you keep growing. Maybe you'll even be as tall as my friend Mike."

"How tall is he?"

"Almost as tall as Hop." Sarah's eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"That's super tall!"

"Yeah, it is. And Ellie likes him 'cause he's tall."

"Will!" El chuckled a pillow at him and he caught it before throwing it back.

"Ellie has a boyfriend?!"

"He's not my boyfriend *yet!*" El protested. Will couldn't help but feel relieved at that last word.

There was hope for Mike after all.

Okay, so this chapter is a little choppy and shorter than the others, but the next chapter is going to split from the main story and I want to get it out by Friday. I plan to make it longer to make up for this one being shorter.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

9. Photos and Letters

WELL SHIT

The ST3 trailer dropped this morning as of writing this author's note and I'M DYING and so I hope you all enjoy this chapter.

Please be negative. Please be negative.

Joyce bit her lip as she waited for the test results on the pregnancy test.

This was ridiculous. She was married and in her twenties; a positive pregnancy test should not stress her out as much as it did, but here she was, praying for a negative result. Lonnie wouldn't show a second child any more affection than he did to Jonathan, which was to say next to none. She couldn't afford a second baby, not unless she took more shifts at work, and that would cut into any time that she had with her kids. It wasn't like Lonnie would suddenly step up and be a father. Hell, *Hopper* was doing more to help parent Jonathan, and he was in the middle of a divorce with his now ex-wife, Terry.

The timer went off and Joyce picked up the white stick. Two lines.

Positive.

I'm pregnant again.

She felt like she was going to collapse. When she was nineteen, she'd found out about Jonathan and married Lonnie shortly afterwards. Now that little boy and Hopper were the only bright spots in her little world. There was no way she'd make it through a second pregnancy. No way.

Knock knock.

"Mommy, are you okay?" Jonathan called, his voice muffled by the door. He was only three.

"I'm fine, Jonathan! I'll be out in a second!"

She swept the pregnancy test into the trash and took a deep breath as she wrapped up the bag to throw out. Jonathan smiled up at her once she opened the door.

"Mommy, I'm hungry."

"Well, then, let's find you something to eat, okay?"

"Okay!"

For the rest of the day, Joyce pretended that the positive test didn't exist, that it wasn't currently sitting in the outside trash, waiting to be picked up on Wednesday. But she couldn't ignore it forever.

"How far along are you?"

"Eight weeks, according to the doctor."

"Joyce, I'm so sorry. I know you're having a rough time with Lonnie as it is."

She bit her lip. Hopper was trying not to broach the subject of Lonnie's 'parenting'.

"That's not the only thing, Hop. There's... there's two heartbeats. *Two*."

"As in... twins?"

"Twins."

"Jesus..."

"I know. I just... how can I raise three kids on my lackluster salary and Lonnie's... however-the-hell he gets money." Hopper took a deep breath. "I might have to give one up. I can take care of two kids, but definitely not three."

"I'll take the kid."

"Hop—"

"I'm serious. Terry has custody of Kat and she sets the visits, so I never get to see her. But I'd like to have a kid in the house again. A little brother or sister for Kitty."

Joyce thought for a second.

Hop can take one baby and I'll keep the other. As long as I don't tell Lonnie that I'm having twins, this will work.

"Okay." Joyce nodded, her throat feeling dry. She wanted her kids, but this was the best choice for them. One day, they'd meet again, but for now... for now they'd be separated.

"Okay. So, we need to make a plan."

"I'm doing the heavy lifting here, Hop." She pointed a finger at him accusingly.

"Hey, I know. I was there when our respective kids were born; I know how hard labor is."

"Sorry."

"Anyway, I was offered a job in Chicago on the force. If I take it, you can have the twins there and nobody in Hawkins will know except you, me, and the doctor."

Joyce nodded in agreement.

The next several months passed in a flurry of activity. Joyce told both Jonathan and Lonnie about the impending baby (Jonathan was excited to be a big brother, Lonnie was indifferent) and word spread through Hawkins that the Byers had a second kid on the way. Hopper moved to Chicago, giving Joyce his address and recommending a hospital for her to give birth in. And two weeks before her due date, he drove out to Hawkins and brought her and Jonathan with him to Chicago.

On March 22, she went into labor and gave birth to a boy and a girl.

The boy was named William James Byers.

The girl was named Jane Eleanor Hopper.

For about two weeks after that, she and Jonathan stayed with Hopper while she recovered from giving birth. Will and Jane (or El, as Hopper insisted on calling her) were extremely close, even waking up at the same time because they were hungry or needed a change. Never because they were lonely. And that's what was making the plan even harder to carry out. In order to give them both the best possible chance, Joyce had to separate the twins.

But when the time came, she left Chicago with Will and Jonathan.

El was Hopper's now.

Joyce,

Hard to believe the twins are six months old now, huh? It seems like just yesterday that I was rushing you to the hospital. I forgot how fulfilling it can be to take care of a kid, especially when they're this little and it doesn't take much to make them happy. She's started teething, too, and she's miserable so much of the time because of that. It's good to know that Jonathan's adjusting well to being an older brother. Kat came over a few weeks ago for a visit and she was ecstatic to be an older sister. Terry... well, she's not thrilled that I'm raising a baby by myself, but as long as El's happy, it doesn't matter. I hope Lonnie's not an insufferable bastard still, but we both know how likely that is.

I miss you and Hawkins sometimes, when I'm trying to sleep and all I can hear is the traffic. It makes me want to move back to the quiet. But then I remember that I have a job and El to think about. Hawkins was a great place to grow up, don't get me wrong, but I think Chicago is the place for El to start. Maybe one day I'll come back. For now, I'll have to settle for your letters and you'll have to settle for mine.

-Jim.

Hop,

Our kids are growing up so fast. Will's started kindergarten and he's

already made a best friend. And you'll never believe who the friend's mother is—Karen Wheeler. Remember her? She has two kids now; a daughter Jonathan's age named Nancy and her son, Michael. And he's just one of the sweetest kids I've ever met. Other than our own, of course! I'm just happy that he's getting along with another kid his own age so well. He spends most of his time with me and Jonathan otherwise.

I loved that picture you sent me of El at the museum. She and Will are smarter than either of us, I think. They're going to go on to do great things. I hope El's getting along with her classmates well at school... if she's started. I'm not sure about the schedule of schools in Chicago.

As for Jonathan, well, he's helping me parent Will more than Lonnie ever has, that's for sure. And Lonnie... he's spending more and more time out of the house lately. I'm starting to think that we might be headed for a divorce. It scares me that the idea of getting divorced from him comes so naturally. But then he'll come home all apologetic and... I don't know, Jim—am I crazy?

Sometimes, I wish that you and I never broke up in high school. Then it'd be you and me here in Hawkins, raising our kids together and the twins being able to be close. But then they wouldn't be the same kids we have now. They'd be entirely different people. Or maybe their personalities would be the same. I have no idea.

I miss you,

-Joyce.

Over the years, Joyce and Hopper kept in contact through letters and pictures. Every snapshot of her daughter warmed Joyce's heart and she kept them in a shoebox under her bed, hidden from Lonnie and her boys. For ten years, her secret was hidden from the world and from Lonnie. But then came the breaking point—the fight that ended their marriage.

And it was because Lonnie found the box.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, slamming the box in front of Joyce.

She was grateful that Jonathan and Will were at school.

"They're pictures," she stated simply.

"Yeah, of *who*? Somebody else's kid? This is *sick*, Joyce."

"No, it's not."

"This girl's the same age as our son. Hm? Who is she?" He took a picture from the box—a picture of El holding a stuffed lion and waving from a swing. "Some little girl you wanted instead of our boy?"

"Lonnie—"

"All I wanna know is who she is and why you have pictures of her."

"Our daughter." He stared at her. "She's our daughter. Will's twin sister."

"We don't have a daughter and Will sure as hell doesn't have a twin!"

"He *does*, and I gave her up. I gave her up to give her a chance at a better life."

"Hmph. And you just, what, didn't tell me?"

"Would you have paid any more attention to our kids if there were three of them?! Would you have shown any more love or affection to El than you show to either of our sons?!"

"Considering I didn't even want these kids in the first place—"

"I *know* you didn't! But you married me because 'it was the right thing to do' and honestly, I don't think it was! The only good things you've ever given me are my kids and that's *it*!"

"Who's she living with?"

"What?"

"Who's my daughter living with?!"

"Your daughter?! You didn't even know she *existed*!"

"But I'm her father. I have a right to know where she is."

"You're *not* her father! Not where it counts! Just like you're not Jonathan or Will's father where it counts!"

"Joyce, you tell me where she is and I'll bring her back to Hawkins—"

"Oh, no, you won't. You're going to let her stay where she is, where she has a life and a father that actually cares about her. Somebody who was there for me with the pregnancy and labor and taking care of my kids when *you* decided that having a family wasn't important!"

"Holy shit. Hopper. My daughter's living with Hopper." He shook his head. "You *bitch*."

"She's his daughter more than she is yours. All you did was get me pregnant. He's done all the heavy lifting to raise her, just like I've done with our sons!"

From there, it was a shouting match and it ended with Lonnie shoving Joyce into the kitchen counter—the first and only time it ever got physical like that in their marriage. In the following weeks and months, it was a string of court appearances and paperwork that ended with Joyce getting the kids and the house and Lonnie leaving Hawkins for Indianapolis. Jonathan was glad to be rid of their deadbeat father. And Will, well, her younger boy was always the more sensitive type. The divorce was hard on him but Joyce tried her best to reassure him.

Not once did she tell them about their sister, about the reason for the fight. She couldn't bring herself to do it. Not when they were upset enough as it was.

Then, two years later, she got a letter from Hopper.

Joyce,

I'm coming back to Hawkins. They've offered me the job as Chief of Police and I've taken it. El's coming with me.

I think it's time to come clean to the kids. Especially since Lonnie's out of the picture. They'll probably be pissed at us for lying, but I know that the twins will be happy to be reunited. And they'll have each other's backs no matter what.

See you soon.

-Jim.

Joyce set the last of the letters back into the shoebox. They'd be saved for years down the line, for looking back, but the pictures she'd had of El were no longer stuffed into the box and left under the bed. Now that everything was out in the open, she could proudly display pictures of all her kids.

"What's that?" Will asked, kneeling beside her as she looked at the Polaroids.

"These are all the pictures Hop sent me of El while they were living in Chicago. So I didn't miss anything."

Will picked up the closest one—a picture of El sitting on a swing and clutching a stuffed lion.

"Oh, wow. I can't believe we never found these before."

"Your father did." Joyce's voice was quiet and Will furrowed his brow. "That's why we had that last big fight. Because he found these and... he wanted to drag El back here to Hawkins. Two years ago."

"He was mad at you for lying."

"He was. And I told him the same thing I told you boys: that I gave her up so she could have her best chance. Because I love all of you."

"He doesn't deserve to know El."

"No, he doesn't."

"Who doesn't?" El inquired from the doorway.

"The piece of human filth that helped make you and your brothers."

"So... Lonnie."

"Yes." El knelt beside Will and fingered a picture of herself between Kat and Kat's best friend, Kali. It had been taken before El left Chicago. "Do you... ever want to know him?"

"Sometimes. But then I'll remember that just because someone's related to you by blood doesn't mean they'll care about you. Sarah's father doesn't care about her. And Kat and Dad might as well be related to me by blood."

"I'm sorry I couldn't watch you grow up."

"That's in the past. At least we'll all be a real family, right?"

"Right."

OKAY, SO NOT SUPER-LONG BUT STILL DECENT

Believe it or not, I had a version of this story where Will found out about El when he was eight because of that shoebox and in that version, he and El were pen pals for years before they actually met in person when she moved to Hawkins. And that story pretty much plays out the same as this one, not gonna lie.

I think next time we'll start some of the Mileven VS Byler for real.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

10. Confessions and Relief

I mentioned this in the author's note at the end of chapter 5 of my story "The Girl Next Door", but I have a goal in mind for my *Stranger Things* multichapter stories. That goal is to finish three of them before season 3 arrives in July. With my semester at college ending on April 29 and me not taking any summer classes, I'll have plenty of time to write when I'm not at work, eating, or sleeping. I have a very boring life, but I'm also planning to maybe go on a small road trip with a friend once the semester's over.

That being said, two of those three have been selected—"The Girl Next Door" and this one—but the third one is still up in the air. I have seven stories to choose from, which isn't making the decision easy, but two of them—"Open Water" and "The Princess and the Paladin"—I'm eliminating right off the bat because I have no idea where to go with their stories at the moment. That leaves "Mage and Paladin", "Hawkins County", "One and Twelve", "The Legend of Hawkins", and "Welcome to Hawkins". Or maybe I'll do the unthinkable and finish seven stories in just... three months. Unlikely but not impossible. Like every crack pairing ever.

But... here we go.

"So, is there a reason you won't give Mike the time of day?"

El bit her lip at Will's question.

They were home alone since their friends had other obligations and their parents had stepped out for the day with Sarah to get her ready for school. It was the first time they'd been alone together since Mike had come home and things were... awkward. Mostly because Will had been seemingly... annoyed at her for some reason that had been unknown until he asked that question. Now she knew why he was annoyed but she couldn't tell him her answer. He'd feel guilty and then she'd feel awful for making him feel guilty and honestly it was such a roundabout mess.

"It's not like he doesn't like you back. You're keeping him in suspense and that's not fair to him. He deserves to know how you feel about him. I mean, he's been head over heels for you since the day you met and you're just... being a bitch about it!"

"I know, okay!" she exploded, slamming her hand into the kitchen table. Will was shocked into silence. "I know I'm being a bitch! I'm not giving him an answer. I'm not letting our relationship happen. I'm not being a good friend. But you know something, Will? You're being a bad friend, too!"

"*Excuse me?*!" Will narrowed his eyes.

"You're talking to *me* about confessing to Mike, about telling him how I feel because I love him, and here you are afraid to do the same thing! You keep hiding how you feel and pushing *me* towards him... and don't say your crush on him is gone because *I know you*. He's been your crush for as long as you've known you're gay and guess what, Will? *That's* why I haven't told him how I feel—because I want *you* to have a chance to tell him, too!"

Will opened and closed his mouth.

"So *forgive me*, brother dearest, for wanting *you* to have a chance at happiness by sacrificing my own. Isn't that what you've been doing for me?" There were tears in her eyes and Will felt like shit.

Fuck. She's right.

"El, I told you—Mike's not interested in me—"

"So tell him! It'll hurt to get rejected, but it'll hurt a lot less than letting it stew and grow."

Will narrowed his eyes at his sister's hypocrisy.

"Shouldn't you tell him, too?"

"Will. I want you to have a chance to tell him how you feel and see if maybe he returns your feelings."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have moved here in the first place; then I

would've had a chance! Maybe you should've stayed in Chicago and we shouldn't have met—much less found out we were twins! God, I wish I didn't *have* a twin sister! Especially not a hypocritic bitch like you!"

The words were out before Will could stop them and El stepped back, her eyes wide with pain as tears welled up. He stared at her, opening his mouth to try to take it back, but she whirled around and ran up the stairs. Will heard her bedroom door slam shut and the muffled sounds of her sobbing.

Fuck. Great job, Will. Mom's going to murder you.

He rushed upstairs and knocked on her door.

"El, I'm sorry!"

"Go away!" she snapped.

"Seriously, I didn't mean that!"

"Please, just leave me alone!"

There was pain in her voice and Will felt something snap between them. That invisible thread that had bound them for two years, the thing that had saved his life when he got lost in the woods, the connection that allowed them to be close as they were... he'd just shattered it. Shattered it because he didn't want to admit his sister was right. His heart pounded and Will went to his own room, slamming the door and falling onto his bed. It was then he realized how silent it was, save for El's crying. That mental connection had been a constant buzz in his head, one that was more comforting than annoying. It let him know his sister was okay, spiking when she was upset, but that buzz was silent for the first time in two years.

What did I do?

Part of him felt empty again, that spot that El had filled since they met. Well, not exactly empty. It was full of remorse and regret and guilt. All he could feel was awful, like he was a horrible person. But she wasn't innocent, either. She was just as guilty of keeping how she felt to herself as he was. The only difference was that Mike was head-

over-heels for El and not Will and trying to be with her because he loved her.

He's gonna hate me for this... but I have to tell him. El's right—better to tell him and get rejected than to let it fester.

But he doesn't know I'm gay... El's the only one who knows. Guess it's time to come out to him...

When Hopper and Joyce came home with Sarah, they noticed the distance between the twins. Neither of them chose to comment on it for the time being, but Sarah looked concerned at her older siblings' behavior.

Not to mention when it was time for school...

"Hey, Will. Where's El?"

Will had arrived alone at the Wheeler house, El choosing to catch a ride with Hopper over biking with her brother and her friends.

"She... decided to ride with Hop this morning."

"Oh." Dustin and Lucas caught up a few minutes later.

"Dude, is something wrong with El?" Dustin asked as they rode to school.

"She's fine." Will's answer was short and finite. Clearly, he didn't want to talk about whatever had happened between him and his sister.

Later that day, though, Mike found a note in his locker.

Meet me at the quarry after school. I have something I need to say to you and nobody else.

Come alone. Don't tell anybody where you're going.

I'll be waiting at the cliff.

Out of pure curiosity Mike decided to go. He excused himself from

going home with everyone else (noting how sad El had looked throughout the day) and headed to the quarry cliff. It was the highest accessible point and nobody really went there.

But when he got there, it was Will waiting by the edge.

"Will?" Mike got off his bike and approached.

"You got my note."

"Yeah. What's this about?"

"It... it has to do with El. And me." He hesitated. "Promise you won't get mad or judge me for anything I'm about to say."

"I promise. What's going on?"

"Remember a couple years ago when I got lost in the woods? And I told you that El loved you but you had to say it first?"

"You never explained what was up with that."

"Well, here it is. She promised me she wouldn't try to be with you unless you made a clear first move." Mike blinked.

"Why would she do that?"

"Because..." Will bit his lip. "I have a crush on you, too."

Mike staggered backwards, shocked.

"I'm gay. El's the only person who knows—and now you're the second person I've told. We got in a fight because of her dancing around her feelings for you and she got on my case about doing the same thing. I said something... horrible. And I can't take it back, but I can at least try and move on so she can be happy. Because you love her and she loves you and I know you don't feel the same way about me."

"Will... how long?"

"Since... since we were eleven. I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure how you'd react. I mean, your best friend since kindergarten is gay

and has a crush on you. But I needed to get it out in the open, at least with you."

For a moment, Mike was speechless.

"So El's been dodging me because she wanted you to tell me how you feel?"

"Her exact words were '*forgive me*, brother dearest, for wanting *you* to have a chance at happiness by sacrificing my own. Isn't that what you've been doing for me?' And she's right. That's the other reason I didn't tell you—because I didn't want to be rejected. But she also told me that it would hurt a lot more if I just let it stew."

"I... I'm sorry. I don't feel the same way. But I'm glad you got it out in the open."

"I am, too."

It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from Will's heart and shoulders. The gaping hole that his fight with El had left was now simply guilt for how he treated her. If she hadn't pushed him, the relief wouldn't have come.

"I think... I think it's time I apologize to El properly." Will rubbed his eye. "She's probably not going to forgive me that easily, but I don't deserve it."

They headed back to the Hopper house, where El was in her room. Music blared through the locked door and Will knocked on the wood. He'd asked Mike to wait in the living room so he and his sister could have some privacy.

"El?"

"Go away."

"Please. I want to talk to you. I... I want to apologize for real. Please let me apologize to your face."

The music abruptly shut off and there were footsteps before the lock clicked.

"Come on in."

Will opened the door and saw that his twin was sitting on her bed. Her homework was around her, open and forgotten. He sighed.

"El... I'm sorry for what I said. I shouldn't have gone that far, but I was so fucking *mad*—"

"And I shouldn't have called you a hypocrite," she stated softly. "Because I'm a hypocrite, too. I just... you're my brother and I want you to be happy."

"I want the same thing for you... so I did it." She jerked her head up and stared at him in shock. "I told Mike how I feel. He let me down gently, but... now I have closure. And you're right about it hurting more to let the feeling stew. Don't let yours."

"I won't. I'll tell him tomorrow."

"Um, about that... he's actually right downstairs. Right now."

"WHAT?!" El jerked so sharply that she fell off her bed with a yelp and hit the floor with a loud *thud*. Rapid footsteps came up the stairs as Mike ran up beside Will, panting heavily.

"El, are you okay?!" he asked.

"I'm fine!" She started to get up and Mike rushed to help her. "Thank you."

"So the reason you didn't go out with me was because you wanted to spare Will's feelings?"

"Exactly."

Will smiled sadly and headed to his own room.

He didn't need to see what was going to happen next.

And this is our second-to-last chapter.

I should be studying for my US History final tomorrow, but I wanna write! Besides, my final's at 11 AM and I'm gonna spend tomorrow morning making a notecard while I watch anime. YAY

Next chapter is an epilogue. Bye bye!